The Many Sons of Winter

Summary

The slumbering direwolf of the North has rested peacefully for nearly three hundred years, content to rest and build as they always had since the days of King Torrhen Stark, who had surrendered his crown to Aegon the Conqueror in the name of peace and fealty. His heart broken by the loss of the kingdom passed down through the ages, his bastard brother takes him on a trek around the North to survey the realm he rules now as Lord Paramount...and in a blizzard, they find something that forever changes the history of not just the North, but the entire world.

But nothing can sleep forever.

When Prince Rhaegar Targaryen snatched Lyanna Stark from the city of Winterfell, the direwolf stirred from its slumber and was enraged by the death of its liege lord and his son and heir...the Andal realms of the South learnt that the North was not the sparsely populated backwater they told their children about, but one of the foremost powers in Westeros.

What if the North had a population on par with the Reach, brought about by having a reliable and consistent supply of food?

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The Great City of Winterfell, 297 years after Aegon's Conquest.

Robb panted behind his visor, tightening his grip upon the dull iron greatsword as his brother, his half brother, backed off, the scratch upon his breastplate catching the light like fresh fallen snow. The clang of steel on steel echoed all around him as dozens of his cousins drilled against one another under the watchful eye of the Master-at-Arms. He focused on the direwolf helm in front of him, even if he could see all the crests around him in the corner of his vision. There was at least one from almost every house in the North, sons that had been sent to the capital to be his father's wards, and to grow alongside him as though they were brothers.

Just as they sent their daughters after Sansa had been born.

"Again," shouted Rodrik from across the courtyard, a few dozen men of the garrison watching the fights with interest...and Wylla Manderly, Alys Karstark and all the beautiful women who were his sister's ladies in waiting, looking down from the crystal glass windows of the Lady's Ballroom nestled against the high walls of the castle between their Septa's lessons.

He lowered his sword towards the ground, taking a defensive stance. He knew better than to try and beat Jon into submission, the last time he tried to do that he had slipped past his side after a missed swing and his brother had slashed his heel to the bone - or at least, he would have, had it been with a real blade.

His brother laughed, the sound booming from his helmet. "Going to wait for me, Stark? That's not very heroic."

Robb laughed, he knew his brother's tricks very well. "That's not going to work, Jon."

There was a crash across the huge courtyard as the Smalljon Umber fell backwards against a weapon rack after one of his cousins - a Snowstark from just south of the Gift - dove into him with his heater shield and sent the giant tumbling backwards. Jon dove forward in a fast flurry, trying to dazzle him with the reflection of his weapon in the late morning sun. Robb swung hard and quick, stopping his brother's assault dead in his tracks as their swords clashed. They were evenly matched, almost the same height, definitely the same weight inside their suits of plate and that made their sessions all the better.

"You need to do better that that, Snow," he said with a hidden smile as he shoved his body forward and sent his brother reeling. He swung diagonally across his brother's breastplate, but he fell backwards, onto one knee, so Robb met him again, swinging downwards, towards the ground and towards his defenseless opponent.

When we're sparring, we have to stop being brothers, if only for a little while.

Jon looked straight up to him, quickly raising his blade, halting Robb's chop before throwing himself up from the ground and turning around the flow of their fight, locking their blades against one
another again...but he saw his brother slid his claw like gauntlet down to his pommel.

Quickly, Jon wrenched his blade around, putting all his strength on the pommel, his sword spinning around Robb's own in a quick, smooth motion...leaving him defenseless as he watched the pommel glide through the air towards him.

*Seven hells!*

There was a deafening bang that turned to ringing and a horrible, teeth rattling shake as the iron pommel smashed into his helmet. His sword slipped from his grip as the left side of his face turned to pain. But above all, he felt the force of his brother - who had slipped round him in his painful confusion - throw his sword over his arms and against his gorget, a position that left him no choice but to submit.

"Yield," he said with a sigh, removing his direwolf helm as a young boy, a ward, ran onto the field and dragged the greatsword away.

Jon laughed in his victory, removing his helm and revealing his triumphant grin. "Looks like it worked to me."

The two walked off the field, Robb rubbing his cheek. "Where'd you learn that, anyway?"

"Arthur Dayne used it agains-"

Suddenly, they both heard the sound of harp music coming from amongst the tall, strong square towers of Winterfell. The castle had been built by Brandon the Builder in the Age of Heroes millenia ago, but it had grown since, built wider and higher. The monstrous keep towered high, casting a long shadow across the lands, as much a symbol of the power of the Starks as their crest. Every tower jutted into the sky, standing tall with pride, not a single one left to fall into ruin. Protective wards of the First Men had been chiseled into the stones and built into the walls, promising to never let the castle fall. The castle was as large as Highgarden in the south, though he was sure the Southrons preferred to think of the castle as being perhaps a quarter of it's actual size, just as they liked to pretend that the North had no cities.

Looking towards the source of the music...he saw Domeric Bolton strumming his harp with masterful precision as he sat upon his wide windowsill, playing music for his love of the music, the flayed man of his house embroidered onto his fine clothes. The Boltons had once been the Stark's fiercest enemies long ago, but now, they were one of their strongest vassals, with a small city of their own outside the walls of the Dreadfort. Their words had once been feared, but now they were innocent and well meaning, nodding towards the fact that they made the finest leatherwork in the North, if not the entire Seven Kingdoms. Everyone knew that it wouldn't be long before he and his sister were wed : Lord Bolton had suggested the match once before, but Ned had decided to let Sansa make her own choice when she came of age...even if her choice was already clear.

"He's at it again. Is there anything he loves more than that bloody harp?" asked Torrhen Karstark, his sword held over his shoulder and his brother Eddard right besides him.

"His hair," Robb answered, to everyone's laughter.

Slowly, his pack, his kin, wandered over. They were from all the Stark cadet branches - the Snowstarks from the far north, where their keep sat amongst the snowy lands just beneath the New Gift, watching over the furthest pastures and the last true market town. They were big, strong men,
from years of marrying with the Umbers and the Clans. The Swampstarks were the opposite, coming from Moat Cailin and were small, but quick on their feet, natural trackers and huntsmen. From the south-east came the Greystarks, the surviving branch that was forever repentant for the treasonous act that lost them the lands that eventually became White Harbor and ensured they would never become as great as any of the other branches. They were hungry for the chance to redeem themselves in the eyes of their fellow Northmen, so they were the first into battle and the last in retreat, always quick to volunteer even in the face of the grimmest odds.

On the east coast there were the Seastarks, who preferred the open sea to the land and patrolled the North's eastern coast alongside the Manderlys, ensuring that lucrative trade routes to Essos were always open. Together, along with the Darkstarks on the coast of the Sunset Sea, they gave the North a fleet, just as they had thousands of years ago in the days of Brandon the Shipwright.

And those were just the greater cadet branches. *No keep in the North is more than a week's travel away from a Stark.*

*Jon's going to have a town of his own soon. He'll be my bannerman and we'll fight the King Beyond the Wall together, just like in the stories.* Their father had already promised Jon his own holding when he was old enough and a marriage too, so it was only a matter of time. Catelyn had been horrified when she found out, even more so than when she found that most of Robb's bannermen were Stark cadet branches descended from bastards and second sons. She thought they would commit treason, try and press a claim on Winterfell whenever Robb needed them most.

*She's wrong...they're my pack, my brothers, just as Bran and Rickon are.*

Sansa walked out of Winterfell's ballroom, blushing as red as a rose and smiling, trailed by her ladies-in-waiting who were her constant companions, just as he had his. Alys Karstark smiled at him and he couldn't help but smile back.

Torrhen and Eddard burst into laughter.

"What?" he asked angrily as Jon watched.

"That smile!" explained Eddard between laughs.

"What's funny?" asked a voice he knew all too well.

*Theon.*

The Greyjoy shoved past Jon, who glared at him angrily. Jon and Theon never got along, not from the first moment they met years ago when Theon had been brought back to Winterfell after his father rebelled. Theon had thought he could walk over Jon, calling him a bastard, insulting him whenever he could, but Jon had lashed back at him each and every time, saying he would rather be a bastard son of Winterfell than the trueborn heir to the Iron Islands. Theon stank of wine and ale from the city's taverns, where he usually drank himself into a stupor so much so that he had to be dragged back to the castle by the city watch lest he end up getting gutted like the squid he was.

"Why do you care, squid?" spat Torrhen with disgust. They all knew how Theon liked to pick fights with Jon...and he was a member of the pack.

*We look after our own, no matter what.*
Theon looked at them all, as arrogant as he always was...till he realized he was encircled on all sides, by other Starks who had wandered over, a show of force as much as it was simple curiosity. He tried to back away, only for Donnel Snowstark - only a year older than Robb yet a foot taller and as hard as a ram - placed a gauntleted hand upon his shoulder from behind.

"Where are you going, Theon?" Robb asked coldly, stepping close. They had done this before, taught the Greyjoy a lesson that to start a fight with one of them was to start a fight with all of them.

"I only wanted to know what was funny, that's all," Theon answered timidly.

"You shoved Jon out of the way, you've done it before, too."

Theon looked at Jon and Robb almost felt sorry for the lone Greyjoy, who would never know the brotherhood that Robb felt with those around him.

He looked towards Donnel and nodded. The large man let him go, shoving him away, but leaving him unharmed...and only because Robb wanted it.

"Don't do it again."

Theon walked off, but he looked back to Robb for a moment before continuing on his way, out of the castle and into the city. In another world, perhaps they could have been like brothers, all of them together as one large, happy pack, but...he doubted it. If he stops trying to pick fights with Jon, then I might try and make a wolf out of him.

"Gods, Robb, when did you get so grim?" asked Jon with a smile, relieving the tension in the air as he always could. They all laughed before heading inside, swapping steel plate for clothes before moving onto the next lesson of the day, before Maester Luwin could find them, or any of their other multitude of tutors for that matter. They did their practice in the lists and in the courtyard, true, learning how to use a lance and a sword, but that was only the beginning.

Heading through Winterfell's great hallways, surrounded by statues of ancient Starks, direwolves standing dutifully at their sides, he led his own pack, his Wolves of Winterfell, to the great war room where Theon the Hungry Wolf had planned his conquests thousands of years before. It was a large room, filled with detailed maps of every part of the Seven Kingdoms, and in the midst a large wooden table, carved to be an exact replica of the North...so old and ancient that it still showed the borders of the Red Kings engraved into its surface, though there had been countless additions since then, the most important being the canal that stretched from side to side of the North. Bookcases covered the walls, with tomes about a hundred different ways of waging war and the designs for siege engines, ancient tactics and warrior tales.

And there, in front of it with his arms crossed and his silver hair long...was a man he didn't recognize, looking back at them all with inquisitive violet eyes and very well dressed in orange and black. On top of his fine clothes was a golden chain, but the most spectacular part of it was the tiger crest dangling from the center, carved from shining topaz. He spoke with an accent Robb couldn't even begin to place. "You're late."

"Who are you?" he asked in confusion. "Where's Rodrik?"

The man looked at all of them, placing his hands behind his back. Then he spoke with certainty and pride. "I see your lord father never told you of the arrangement. Very well. I am Free Citizen Horrono Vaenryis of Volantis. I am of the Tiger faction and you may address me as Citizen"
Vaenyris. Your father believes you have learnt enough of the Westerosi "way" of war, and that you should learn the true manner of grand strategy and the tactics that maintained the Valyrian Freehold and preserve it's final ember today."

Is he mad?

Robb began to speak, "We don't have dragons -"

"Dragons? Dragons?" Vaenyris laughed. "Dragons were powerful, yes, but you cannot hold territory with a dragon. You cannot forage for supplies with a dragon, you cannot garrison a city with them. The Freehold was built with dragons, not kept with them. A dragon can be slain with a bolt from a scorpion to the neck, but the will of a people to wage war, can't. Do you truly believe that the Valyrians destroyed the Ghiscari Empire without taking defeats?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

"No! They didn't! They were defeated many times upon the battlefield! Riders killed, dragons slain, armies destroyed! Ghiscari legions were invincible on the battlefield."

"Then...how did they win?" asked Jon, staring at the Volantene in confusion.

"They won...by destroying the Ghiscari legion. Not the armies, but the concept, the creation. The Ghiscari legion was a complex thing. Soldiers, each serving for three years under arms, officers staying on for longer. Free men, not slaves, well armed, well trained, well equipped, gathered from around the Empire and from all walks of life, supported by well engineered siege weapons. A culture of soldiers, trained to fight as a group and not as warriors in single combat, not like the other peoples of the world at the time...they were a -"

Robb spoke instinctively. "A pack."

Citizen Horrono Vaenyris smiled. "Exactly. They fought as a unit, never breaking in search of individual glory. They knew their strength came from functioning as a whole, like bricks in a wall. But bricks are held together by mortar, so that is what the Freehold attacked. They attacked the cohesion, the brotherhood, that held together the legion. There are two weapons in the armory of a leader. Shock...and awe. Rodrik taught you the former, I shall teach you the latter."

He reached beneath the table and pulled out a map, not caring what it was meant to be of. Then he started placing forces. "Awe...is an attack against the enemy's spirits. The selective and instantaneous decapitation of the enemy army through the perception of our own invincibility...and the belief of their own weakness."

All of his brothers stared at the man in a mixture of awe and confusion, but Robb stepped forward eagerly, looking at the map and taking in every word. "You're talking about a farce...a trick? Making the enemy think they are weaker than they really are?"

The tiger started to grin. "Correct again. A general who has won every battle he has been in before can often win every battle he goes into, simply because his reputation destroys enemy morale and makes them believe they will be defeated. It doesn't matter what the reality is, what matters is the perception of what is, and that can be an illusion. Once, there was a Volantene tiger who had five hundred men and made a town with twice his numbers defenders surrender, simply with that understanding. Besides the city, there was a thick forest. During the night he sent four hundred men into the forest and all his horse far away, leaving only a small number of men to go about their
business in the camp as usual."

"When the sun rose...his cavalry returned, looking like the vanguard of a reinforcing army while the four hundred men in the forest staggered their movement and walked past the gatehouse. In the forests, it couldn't be seen, so when they walked out..." he fell quiet, letting Robb realize.

"It looked like there were more than there really were."

"Exactly! He marched his men past the gates to show how many there were, spaced wide enough from one another that they could walk around the entire castle and never lose sight of one another as they marched around the walls, counting on the defender's fear of an army that did not exist. So he rode up to the walls and demanded them to surrender, saying he had two thousand men now and another ten thousand on the way, warning that if they did not surrender, he would burn the town and sell everyone into slavery."

"They threw open the gates and threw down their arms without a man being so much as drawing their sword. This is where the real power of dragons lies. They can kill men, certainly, they can destroy castles, of course, but they are a weapon of awe, they can be seen across the battlefield with ease, their presence is noticeable and they leave a lasting legacy in the minds of people. Think very carefully. The Targaryens burnt Harrenhal, yes...and that means...?"

"They....they made an example of it. The greatest castle ever raised. Everyone would hear of it..." Robb said, grasping the concept. "It would make people think of how their own castles could be burnt and make them think their dragons were unstoppable. Aegon the Conqueror...he wanted Harren to fight him!"

"Any dragon can be killed, but their reputation cannot. That is how Valyria defeated the Ghiscari legion. They attacked the veteran soldiers who inspired the men around them first, those who kept order. Then they would withdraw. Attack, retreat. Attack, retreat. The same army, coming from different directions each time, different portions of the army doing the attack, different dragons if they had them. Making the enemy believe there were more enemies in the area than there really were, with no around with enough experience to see through the deception, all while they were being pecked at, a piece at a time. Then they started having their scouts killed, their foraging parties wiped out...supplies grew short, and the legion turned against itself."

"All we had to do, was sit and watch and allow the world's most powerful army destroy itself. All while, our own power was growing as the Freehold crept forward, hatching new dragons, raising new armies to the point they could match the fractured legions, taking the resources of the conquered lands of Essos and using them. But the Ghiscari Empire...cracks were beginning to form. Their leaders were arguing over the little they had, competing for reinforcements and arguing over how best to fight us. The pack was tearing itself apart. It was a war of frustration, not of glorious, heroic conquest, slow and long, but it was to our strength and their weakness. The legions were not used to long, hard campaigns...and soon, a power struggle started in the Empire."

"By the time it ended, there was no longer an Empire to claim. Our forces had reached the capital, their legions burnt beneath the shadows of our wings. The Ghiscari Empire had been the greatest power in the world at that time, and they were brought down by a Freehold no bigger than any of the Free Cities. Deception, young lord, is the but one of the three great parts of warfare, the second is maneuver, the third is force. Learn to control and use all three...and you shall never know defeat."

"The Ironborn knew how to make use of maneuver - their ships let them ignore the worst terrain and isolate enemy strongholds - and they knew how to make use of force to crush their foes on the
battlefield, but they did not know the value of knowledge, of learning about one's enemies and so they were ultimately defeated. The Wildlings know of deception and mobility but not force, so they will never truly defeat the Night's Watch or the North. The Dothraki are mobility and force also, like the Ironborn they are like a fire. Powerful, furious, but ultimately short lived. But Aegon the Conqueror...he knew of the power that was in knowledge and understanding, deception and trickery, mobility and overwhelming power. He spent years planning his conquest of Westeros...and so he had already won from the moment he first stepped ashore."

"So, let us begin!" he said with clear enthusiasm.

He went to his pieces and started shuffling his forces extremely quickly, knowing exactly how he wanted them deployed. The Wolves gathered around as Robb carefully examined the Free Citizen's forces. He had created...a mess? His infantry were arranged as if by a madman, his flanks were curved wide and thin, even his cavalry were in a position where they would never get enough momentum for a decisive charge. Everything was almost the opposite of what Rodrick had taught him and what his own instincts told him. But he shook off the confusion and carefully arranged his own army, the Volantene not moving once as he took in every exact detail.

Then the battle began.

And somehow, in what looked like only a few blinks of an eye, everything was coming apart at the seams. He had used his wide flanks to envelop Robb's army, his disorganized infantry in the melee seeming to be exactly where they needed to be at the exact moments they were needed, all while his cavalry simply sat back, unused except for those scarce few moments where Robb managed to nearly breakout.

"Deception and knowledge is the foundation upon which all warfare is based."

He reached over the pieces and knocked over the Stark banner that represented Robb's lord, showing he had been slain in battle. Then he took up another map, a map of Westeros, setting the pieces again in a rough recreation of Robert's Rebellion. The North had been content to simply sleep through the conflicts of the South or send them token forces of a few thousand men as they had in the Dance and the Blackfyre Rebellions, with most southrons thinking that the North was far weaker than it really was. But Rhaegar had woken the North and Aerys had enraged it, so the armies of the North poured forth, seventy thousand men eager for vengeance with another thirty thousand guarding the homeland from any threat, whether they were wildlings or Ironborn. The Lannisters have gold, the Martells have deserts and the Greyjoys have ships, but we have men.

"How do you know all of this?"

"I was born in the orange and grew up surrounded by tigers, taught from my youth in the Valyrian ways of warfare and combat, but I was hungry for more knowledge, reading as many tomes as I could find about leading men into battle. One day, my searches led me to an old man, an exile from Yi Ti who had decided to spend the rest of his days travelling. He had been a commander of men so great he was worthy of legend, but he had fallen out of favor with his masters when he tried to take the throne for himself, only being spared because of his past victories. He had spent the last of his wealth and could barely speak the Common Tongue, so in exchange for a place to stay, I asked him to teach me whatever he could. We taught each other, truly, but he made me realize the true value of deception and simply making your enemy uncertain of your goals. A few years later, he received a pardon after a new faction came to power, so he returned home after thanking me. I never heard from him again, but his lessons have stayed with me."
He gestured to the map with an empty hand...Robb finally noticing his pack had left for whatever reason.

"And I'm going to teach you, just as he taught me. Tactics is one animal but strategy and diplomacy are another. We will look through the history of the Seven Kingdoms, of Essos and of the Valyrian Freehold." He looked Robb straight in the eye. "And do not worry about dishonor. Sometimes you must do dishonorable things now to complete greater honors tomorrow and there is no greater honor than to win without killing."

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End of Part 1!

Chapter End Notes

Jon Snow, in this story, has never had to grow up with the stigma of being a bastard. Oh, sure, he is still a Snow, but he has known since he was very little that he would eventually be landed as the population of the North increases and new settlements continue to pop up. He's thus more confident, less grim, even a little playful, but the same honorable Jon beneath it all. Catelyn hasn't been able to treat him as bad as she did in canon, since whenever she complained Eddard could simply point to the various Stark cadet branches, most of which are descended either from second sons or bastards.

Robb Stark is different too, having grown up around a lot of future Northern heirs, not to mention ladies. They're not hostages, the houses of the North sent them willingly so that they could grow alongside other Northern houses...which is naturally good for diplomacy. It also helps with match-making, but most important is that Robb Stark is friends with them - they know that one day Robb will be the Lord of Winterfell. He will be the only person who can grant town or city charters, which are [I]beyond important[/I]. Without a charter, a town cannot legally create a marketplace, or set its own tax rates or create their own watch. Hell, they can't even put crenels on their walls without their charter giving them permission.

A good charter could mean that a city gets tax breaks on certain goods or professions, reduced tariffs and tolls, even self governance through a city council in some cases...though even then, they would be subservient to the lord.

But a bad charter would be the reverse and could utterly destroy a settlement's commerce, if not outright downgrade it from city to market town.

Winterfell, as a castle, is larger than it is in canon, but it's still no Casterly Rock or Harrenhal, that's for sure. It has a larger garrison, a much larger keep and not a single part of it has been allowed to fall into ruin. It has strong oaken rafters, walls high and thick, towers crowned with catapults and several barbicans watching the approaches and ensuring that the beating heart of the North will stay that way.

I'll be covering more about the state of the North in later parts, for now, I'm going to be establishing the changes to the Stark family in this scenario. So, the next parts will be, in order, Jon, Sansa, Bran, Arya, Catelyn and lastly, Eddard himself.
Then we'll have Robert, because this part takes place the day before the start of the books :D

Anyway, on with the summary of this part : Robb Stark...meets Sun Tzu.

:p

But seriously now, Robb Stark is being taught by a Volantene general, who is teaching him the value of grand strategy and large scale diplomacy and intrigue, not just tactics. Eddard hired him to give his son a different perspective on warfare, maybe an insight to the way the Essosi fight in case they ever went to war with one of the Free Cities, but the Free Citizen is doing much more than he had been hired for :p And of course, Robb Stark is more flexible in this area than he was in canon simply because of the state of the North and how he will have to carefully maintain the balance of power in the North in his own right, as well as understand the full implications of his actions.

Of course, he's obviously not going to be doing a Red Wedding of his own anytime soon, but if this was the Robb Stark of canon, he certainly wouldn't have married Jeyne Westerling, as he would know that he should choose the lesser dishonor (deflowering a noble woman) over the great dishonor (breaking his betrothal to a Frey.)

He's just more flexible, more aware of reality.

And we see a few of the branches of the Stark family. The North, as we know in canon, is mostly empty, or small settlements that answer to absolutely no one. That's not so much the case in this timeline, since the holdings of the lords are actually smaller than they are in canon, but much greater in wealth and population. Even now, centuries after the PoD, there are still vast stretches of land that are easiest to describe as lacking official claims. Most of the Northern houses own one or two castles, maybe three if they're particularly powerful, but they'll be spread amongst the dynasty. There's still competition over the most valuable parts of the North, but that is less over natural resources and more over valuable trade routes. The real competition is for the favor of the Starks to get them to give privileges.

Anyhow, there are several cadet branches of house Stark scattered throughout the North, some of them more successful than others. The Karstarks are still the strongest house to be descended from the Starks, however.

And of course, Theon loses out. As in canon, he and Jon don't get along...but Robb and his friends have Jon's back.

So, he spends most of his time drinking and whoring rather than getting up to no good with Robb :p
Jon looked at himself in the mirror, looking at the blue and gold direwolf crest embroidered upon his breast. He was a bastard, true, but he was a bastard of Winterfell, future lord of some part of the North. He had already had a few marriage proposals from lesser houses and masterly ones, but most of them were waiting to see what he would be given, first. He could be granted a new market town on the western coast, or a simple keep in the Wolfswood. He had to figure out words of his own...and of course, the colors of his new house once it was founded.

Winterfell was a city, a great city at that, so there was never a lack of tailors who knew the different crests and colors of those houses that traced their lines back to the Starks. It was the hardest part of his life as a bastard. Figuring out what colors...and words...and crest. Gods be good, how am I supposed to do it?

The blue and gold looked good, but...he had the distinct feeling he had seen it somewhere else before, during a feast...he sighed. "This won't do. I think I've seen another house with these colors."

The tailor paused, looking over him from head to heel as he thought. He was being paid very well for this, Jon was making certain of it. He had a fondness for fine clothes, as Theon did, but this was far more important than just having a fine doublet. It was the creation of a family of his own...and he would spare no expense. Then he helped Jon take off the doublet and picked up another, the exact same shape and size, simply a different color for the crest, the trim and the cloth.

Red and gold.

Jon laughed at the sight of himself in the mirror. "I'm a Stark, not a Lannister."

The tailor chuckled to himself, then took that doublet away. While Robb had battled with his new mentor, he and the rest of the pack had left to go about their day. For Donnel, that was getting his axe mended after snapping the pole during practice, for the Karstark brothers, that meant teasing their sister. The tailor stepped over again, with another doublet of a purple direwolf head on white.

"Dayne?" he asked, looking at himself in the mirror as the tailor adjusted the fit till it was just right.

"Aye...for the rumors of your mother," nodded the tailor, looking for a matching cloak. "This would be much easier, had you any idea what land you were getting."

"Even I don't know that, or who my mother was. Best to avoid the Dayne colors, till we know for sure." The thought of who his mother was had crossed his mind a dozen times, but each time he asked his father he had promised to tell him when he was older, when he was sixteen and truly a man grown in his own right. The entire North wondered who the honorable Eddard Stark had put a child in during the war. Was it a highborn lady? A whore? Just some girl he had fucked one night?

He didn't let it bother him. Eddard had promised to tell him when he was older and it was more of a curiosity than anything important anyway. He would always be Eddard's son and Robb's brother, regardless of who his mother was. The tailor sighed. "Why not...black on red, or purple on gold?"
The Darkstarks are orange on black...so it shouldn't be too hard to tell us apart.

"Black on red...let's see." The tailor rummaged through a pile of twelve doublets, all of them tailored to Jon's size, every single one a different set of colors. Then there were cloaks to go with them, breeches, boots, gloves and hats...which he never wore, but it helped to keep the styling consistent. The tailor smiled, then walked over with a black on red doublet. It was as soft and as high quality as all the others and after fastening it up and looking at himself in the mirror, he liked it more than all the others combined.

"This'll do," he said with a smile. He quickly changed out his normal clothes for the black and red ones. Then he headed outside, into the bright light of day...and saw snowflakes coming down, the beginning of a summer's snow falling down upon the city. The cobblestone streets were busy, packed with crowds going about their day in peace, carts rolling past drawn by men, bright orange Northern cows and the occasional horse, ferrying goods to and from market. Looking over the marketplace was a wierwood tree, a contemplative face carved into its surface, ensuring that every deal that took place in the market was seen by the Old Gods. If that was not enough to deter a thief, then the golden eagles that soared through the sky above were. The city watch had the service of a dozen wargs, and what better way to patrol the city streets than from the sky, where one man could watch thousands? Statues of ancient heroes as far back as Brandon the Builder watched over the people just as they had in life, though their bodies were entombed beneath the castle.

He walked through the busy marketplace, looking around and never losing his smile. The smell of freshly baked bread and pastries wafted from a well built baker's shop, besides which was a large, proud tavern that served the best ale in the city. He saw a young boy, covered in dirty leathers with the same Stark hair and eyes walk towards the bakery. He looked at an apple pastry inside, then he started rummaging through his coin purse...only to sigh in disappointment after counting his coins. Jon walked over and took out a silver.

"Here," he said.

The boy looked at him in shock, but he couldn't help but notice that the boy looked...familiar. Very so. "Thank you."

No...she couldn't have made it out the castle this time.

The boy quickly turned and started to walk inside.

"Arya?"

The "boy" froze dead in her tracks. "My name's Arry! Arry the peasant boy!"

He laughed. "And what will Ned think if he finds out you've ran off again, "Arry"?"

She sighed. "Don't tell father, please?"

He mussed her hair. "Why would I tell father, you've been by me the entire time."

She looked at him in confusion for a moment, then caught on with a smile. Arya was outside the castle more often than she was inside it, a septa's worst nightmare made real. She had no interest in being like a lady, certainly not, even Ned could barely keep her reigned in...and he was usually unwilling to try, since she resembled her aunt all too much in how she acted and how she looked.
The city watch knew to keep an eye out for her, but Arya had only grown more experienced and more determined in slipping out of the castle to escape Septa Mordane. *I wouldn't have recognized her if she had enough money.* She knew how to blend in with the crowds, how to disappear whenever she wanted to...and sometimes by accident. Before, when she was little, she had completely vanished inside Winterfell, only to be found asleep in the rafters of the great hall itself. They had searched high and low, throughout the entire city, but they had never noticed her till she started to snore in her sleep.

*She didn't even know how she got up there when they got her down...*

*But she's helping the watch find any weaknesses in the castle, aye, and in the city, too.*

She looked at his clothes. "Have you finally chosen your colors?"

"I think so," he answered with his usual smile. "There isn't another house in the North with them."

"Does...that mean you're getting your land? You're leaving?"

Arya was as close to Jon as Robb was, even coming with the Wolves sometimes, even though it made Catelyn try all the harder to keep her daughter inside the castle. *An uphill battle.* She tried to tempt her with nice things, but Arya wasn't interested in soft dresses, beautiful jewelry or anything like that. She liked to explore like her brother Bran, she liked to wear leathers instead of dresses and would rather make a bow sing than a harp, but she was gradually starting to tame the wild girl...and then Eddard got Arya a full set of leather clothes, perfectly fitting to her and hard wearing, well suited for travelling through the city and made from Bolton leather. After that, Catelyn had mostly given up on trying to make her into as gentle a lady as her sister Sansa...who, again, was certainly Northern in how she liked to wear fur coats.

He laughed. "Not yet. Not for a couple of years, anyway. Come on, we best get back to the castle before your mother gets too worried."

Arya sighed and passed his back his silver, but followed as they returned to the castle, through the wide streets and gardens. The city had been built wide, with even the smallest buildings in the city being large when compared to the cities of the South - space was no obstacle - so the city had five godswoods inside the walls, places where the Old Gods still ruled supreme and their worshipers frequented. There were a few shrines to the New Gods around, a few small septs, but the largest was within the walls of Winterfell, built for his wife by Lord Stark so that she had a place to pray suitable for her station. But even her daughter Sansa had to be asked to go there, keeping the gods of her friends and ladies in waiting instead of the Seven.

As soon as he entered the castle, he heard Dacey shout out, not to him but to Arya, the she-bear standing tall in leathers of the same styling as Arya's, moving so smoothly that she might as well have been born with them. "Your mother has been looking everywhere for you!"

Jon turned red ever so slightly as the Mormont woman looked at him. Dacey had been his first love, even though she was five years older than him. He had been infatuated with her, so much so that he had proudly strode across the courtyard in broad daylight and confidently proclaimed his everlasting love and admiration for her...in front of all the Wolves of Winterfell, in fact, in front of nearly the entire guard, who had been drilling in the courtyard. *What was I even thinking...* Robb had stared at him with his jaw agape at how bold he was...only for them all to burst into laughter when he was turned down, since he was little more than a child at the time and Dacey hadn't even the first idea that he was in love with her before then. He gave Edd Karstark a black eye and retreated to his chambers
to be alone, then later that night the Wolves of Winterfell pinched a cask of ale from the buttery and helped him drink his sorrows away, even Edd and Torr.

They still teased him for it, every now and then. *For good reason!*

"Any news from Bear Island?" he asked, trying to break through the awkwardness.

She smiled and said eagerly, "Jorah has another son, Gerold Mormont."

"That's his fourth, isn't it?"

Many Northern lords weren't expecting much of Jorah's marriage to Lynesse Hightower. She was as southron as one could get, a pampered lady as fragile as glass who'd only give Jorah two children before she died. But that was her fourth birth - a daughter and three sons, now - and she had never lost a child. Everyone knew she had expensive tastes, but the Lord Mormont had turned the shipyards of Bear Island to make ships for sale to the other kingdoms and to merchants to make up for the expense. *He's not making ships for the navy...but if I loved a woman as much as he loves his wife, I would do the same to make her happy.*

"It is," she laughed, "Jeor, Brandon, Rhea and now little Gerold...and the Lannisters offered to buy Longclaw. A mountain of gold for it." Then she sighed, but smiled with relief. "He never even thought of it, thankfully."

"If I had a Valyrian steel sword, no one would be able to get it out of my hands."

Dacey looked at his clothes before asking with a teasing smile, "...Is this the sixth Blackfyre Rebellion?"

*What?*

He looked down at himself, at his red doublet with black stitching and the black direwolf above his heart.

*Black and red...black on red. Seven hells! That damn tailor never said!*

He spun on his heels and walked across courtyard towards the keep, Dacey laughing as he tried to draw as little attention to himself as possible. Catelyn disliked him as a bastard, true, but to have the colors of a man who tried to steal his brother's throne, a bastard who started a line of pretenders... *She'll kill me if she sees me wearing this.*

"Jon!"

He sighed as the kraken walked over grinning.

"What is it, Theon?"

"Jon *Blackfyre.*" Theon laughed. "Has Lord Stark given you Ice?"

He had dreamt of it, once, of Ned giving him Ice to wield, to carry into battle as his own blade. He knew it would never happen, it was not his weapon to carry. It belonged to the Starks of Winterfell, not to any of their cadet branches, like the crown of the Kings of Winter had. Though he might never wield the weapon, he had a something just as special, a gift from father to son. A bastard sword for
the bastard son, with the same design of cross guard and pommel, the same patterned grip, only smaller. He had been given it on his thirteenth name day and to him, it was worth more than a thousand Valyrian steel swords combined.

"No."

"Shame," the Greyjoy gave him a sly grin he already knew to hate. "That'll be your brother's...and Winterfell -"

_Not this again. I don't have time for this._

"Aye. But I have brothers. You don't."

Theon laughed sadly as Jon walked into the keep through the side entrance, the one that led to the lord's kitchen. The cooks were busy preparing the day's dinner, cooking the many roasts and joints of beef that were the foundation of Northern cooking. _We've a hundred different ways to cook beef._ The Northern cow was as muscular but leaner than it's southern cousin, though it had a coat of fur so thick peasants sheared them to make clothes and blankets. Not a single part of the animal was left to go to waste. The bones were milled into meal and sown in the fields to make the crops grow strong, the marrow was boiled to make broth, the balls and the rest of that area were usually thrown to the dogs or given to the poor. The organs were made into sausages and given to the guards...or to the Night's Watch, as a good dry beef sausage could last for nearly a year in a cupboard...and forever, if kept cool in the buttery underground. _We must be the only castle in the Seven Kingdoms that has their granary packed with sausages..._

He calmly walked through the kitchen, the servants too busy with their cooking to pay him much attention. The smell of hearty beef and ale stew wafted through the air strongly, making his belly growl. Round loaves were flipped in the wood ovens, trenchers, ready for the men-at-arms. Plates of trifle pewter were cleaned and another cask of ale rolled up from the buttery, not drinking but to be added to the sauces. His mouth watered, but he forced himself onwards...past a small basket of little buns decorated with the seven sided star, smelling ever so slightly of cinnamon and raisins. They were for the sept, he knew, they were for one of the holidays of the Faith, something to do with Hugor of the Hill being brought back seven times.

_Just one couldn't hurt...but I shouldn't take it for free. It wouldn't be right._

He looked around and waited till everyone's back was turned. Then he quickly snatched one from the basket and walked out before anyone could notice, swapping it for the silver coin he planned to give the "boy" earlier. The great hall was busy, crowds beginning to fill up the room for when his father held court. The ceiling was high, with thick oaken rafters holding up a steep roof. The dais was wide and high, big enough that a dozen could be feasted on the high table in comfort and a thousand more beneath the salt, maybe more if they removed the proud statues that lined the walls. _Tapestries rot, paintings fade...but statues are forever._

He slipped through the crowds, staying in the rear, till he reached a stairwell and started his way up to his room on the third floor, finishing the bun on his way up.

Then, right as he was about to walk out the stairwell, he heard Wylla Manderly and his brother Robb on the other side, walking past. Like a number of the North's maidens, she had her eyes on the Stark heir. Ever since Torr and Edd got drunk with Robb and found out he likes girls who have their hair down, Alys had let her hair grow long and kept it unbraided...then Wylla followed. She was a pretty girl, one who genuinely enjoyed being at Winterfell, but she also helped represent her family's
interests.

*I can't let Robb see me like this.*

"...I know that you don't have the power to do it yourself, but can't you talk to your father? Convince him?"

Robb sighed. "I don't think he would agree. You've got a great charter already...but to make White Harbor a staple port..."

"It's not that big of a change, not really. Most of the towns on the White Knife send their goods down river to sell them at White Harbor anyway. It would just be making it official, that's all."

"I'll think about it."

"Thank you!" Wylla said cheerfully...followed by the sound of a peck on Robb's cheek that almost made Jon burst into laughter.

Finally, one of them walked off...then Robb opened the door to the stairwell, looked at Jon once and sighed.

"You heard all that, didn't you?"

"Aye, I did," he answered with a teasing smile. "What would Alys think?"

"I think she'll be wondering why you're dressed like a Blackfyre." Robb smiled back, crossing his arms. "What would mother do if she saw you wearing that?"

"I didn't see anything if you didn't," he offered.

Robb nodded. "Fine by me." Then he laughed. "Who would've ever thought being surrounded by pretty girls could be so bad?"

Jon stepped out of the stair well, closing the door behind him, just in case someone walked up on him from behind and saw his distasteful clothes. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, Jon. It'd be so much simpler if I could just...marry Alys and Wylla, or all the ladies. I wouldn't have to resist either of them! Or any of the others!"

"Isn't that what moontea is for?"

"That doesn't get rid of the dishonor of deflowering a lady, though."

Jon shrugged before answering half seriously and half japing, "That didn't stop uncle Brandon. He must have slept with half the North if the stories are true, and he was honorable. A lot of people thought he was more of a man because of it."

Robb paused to think for just a moment.

Then he smiled, a wide, happy smile...that horrified Jon to his core.

"Robb, you're not actually serious, are you?"
"No, no, don't worry. I've got a plan."

He walked right past Jon and down the stairs, never losing his smile and leaving Jon alone in the hall. He rushed to his room and got changed into a different set of clothes as quickly as possible, throwing his Blackfyre colored into his dresser where hopefully no one would see them till he got rid of them...then he ran back down the stairs to stop his brother from making a horrible mistake.

*Or...a really good one.*

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Chapter End Notes

Well, this post was fun to write! Not quite as long as the last one, I think but still big! Like I said at the start of it, Jon is a radically different character than he is in canon, never having grown up with the stigma of being a bastard, but in a culture where such a thing was accepted, kinda like Dorne.

In canon, there was a point in Jon’s childhood where he wasn't allowed to pretend to be the Lord of Winterfell anymore whenever he played games with Robb...well, simply put, that never happened. On the contrary, he's been told that he would grow up to be the lord of his own castle one day. He's been surrounded from youth by other boys and girls, some older than him and some younger, too, so he's going to know of more "adult" things than in canon, like moontea. Hell, Robb knows about the stuff.

One of the things Jon has actually been trying to deal with is finding a set of colors he likes, some words, a crest and a name for his house once he gets landed, so he's trying to get as much of that done before he gets his title...and of course, a wife. He had almost settled on some colors till he realized they were the same ones as the Blackfyres. That wouldn't be a problem for him...but Catelyn's reaction would probably make the Doom of Valyria look tame.

And of course, a butterfly from a wealthier North : Jorah has just enough money to keep Lynesse happy, so he never had to sell the poachers into slavery and thus stayed on the right side of the law, keeping Longclaw and having children with his wife. Dacey is pretty much his representative at Winterfell, speaking on behalf of the Mormont family during whenever Ned holds court.

Which is another reason why there are sons and daughters from the different regions. The North is developing, so every choice Ned makes has enormous consequences. A raise of taxes on wood, for example, slows down the construction of new buildings throughout the entire North, makes people migrate away from the forests in search of cheaper places to live and reduces most people's profits...but increases the amount of wealth in the hands of the nobility.

He has to play a careful game of balancing the needs of his people with the desires of his nobles. The North before was empty and thus quite simple, but now that the population is much higher it has grown a hell of a lot more complicated.
And, uh, the Westerosi version of the hot cross bun appears, mostly because I was snacking on one while writing the post. But we also see an insight into the Northern diet: because it is based off cattle, there is a lot of meat. Thick steaks for feasts, stews for guards, dry sausages for long term storage - which really, really can last for years in storage and practically indefinitely in the cold - and pretty much every single part of the animal. Of course, a family like the Starks will only ever eat the best parts of the animal, with different parts being more commonly eaten based on how wealthy a family might be.

But they do eat things other than meat, it's just a really big slice of their diet. Incidentally, I actually did some research about this because I was wondering how many Northerners might have died from heart disease, and to my surprise it turns out Argentina has the highest beef consumption...eating around 59.4 kilograms per person last year, but they have surprisingly low death rates on things that are related to eating too much red meats. It turns out, the reason is they feed their cattle natural grass rather than grain based feeds like in the US. This drastically reduces the amount of marbling and makes it much healthier to eat.

So, no need to worry about Eddard Stark dying of a heart attack anytime soon I'm sure that would've been a unique way for him to die in an ASOIAF story...

And of course...Robb's getting himself into trouble. Now before you judge him too harshly, remember he's fourteen/fifteen and surrounded by pretty girls. And of course there was a "subtle" reference to a certain cooperative story.

Next part will be a Sansa section! She got a mention in this part, too : She's been surrounded by Northern ladies, so she's not quite the picture-perfect Southron she was before.

Instead, her personality is more...Northern. You'll see what I mean.

Oh, and I had to fudge the numbers of White Harbor up a little - fifty thousand people in Kiev/White Harbor would be the same as it is estimated to be canon. So, if anything, that city would be higher, probably closer to seventy five thousand to factor in their own growth.
Sansa let out a soft sigh as she looked from her window and saw her sweet, gentle Domeric playing his harp, all of her favorite songs, occasionally looking towards her with a smile she always returned. He was quiet, unlike many of the other boys at Winterfell, and he enjoyed playing the harp, learning about the past and was as swift as a demon when on a horse...he even had the makings of a champion in the lists, as he had proved at White Harbor before. He was kind and caring, an honorable Northman, he was even friends with Robb and his pack and would always mount up to ride with them whenever they left Winterfell. He had his father's white eyes, but instead of them being as cold as ice they were warm, loving and friendly, like a gentle summer's snow. Once, she had found him listening to Old Nan's stories besides her younger brother Brandon with genuine interest, eager to learn even more about the past, then he took another book out from the library and headed into the godswood with his harp in one hand and the tome in the other, idly playing as he read.

It was like something out of a song, a fairy tale from the Age of Heroes.

*But why does it make father so...sad?*

Her father always smiled to see her so happy and so clearly in love, but when he saw her and Domeric together...his smiles always turned to silent sadness. She had asked him, once, but he had never answered, never explained why it made him so sad to see. He had even seen Domeric play *Alysanne* to her, the song she liked the most out of all her favorites, a song he played so well it could make her cry, but he had froze the moment he saw the tears on her cheeks and heard the sound of Domeric's harp. He was so clearly in pain at the sight that Domeric stopped playing the song and started to play something more jolly and cheerful, an attempt at playing the *Bear and the Maiden Fair* on harp using only the highest and lowest notes, something that sounded so delightfully mad it made both of them burst into laughter at the sound of it and made even her solemn father smile again before continuing on his way. *Has my father a soft spot for sad music?*

*Or is it something else? Maybe...maybe Jon's mother played the harp, too?*

No one knew who Jon's mother was, but many people thought it was Ashara Dayne, though Eddard had tried to quash the rumors they always flared up every now and then, with company that was ever madder than the last time. Most people thought he had lain with someone at Harrenhal, but who changed from person to person. Wylla thought it might have been the daughter of Lord Whent, Alyssa, who he was said to have comforted after she lost the title of the Queen of Love and Beauty. She died a year after the end of Robert's Rebellion, slipping on the steps of the Kingspyre tower and breaking her neck when she hit the bottom, but Wylla thought she had thrown herself down them in grief. Aly's thought it was Ashara Dayne, like many of the other ladies, but Dacey had certainly heard the strangest of the rumors when she visited a tavern a few years after her uncle Jorah was married and met a wanderer from across the Narrow Sea...who said that the reason that Jon Snow so strongly had the Stark looks was because Eddard had bedded his own sister and gotten her with child, but no one believed that, not even Dacey herself, who thought that it might have been one of the other maidens who could trace their line back to house Stark, maybe a Greystark.
We'll find out in a few years, when he tells Jon. Till then, there's no harm in guessing.

Domeric leaned out the window from which he was playing and smiled at her again.

She blushed as she smiled in return. Her ballroom was a well decorated room inside the keep, beneath her bedchamber, but his chambers were at the top of the nearest tower, so she could look up and see him with ease just as he could look down and in through the opening if the shutters were open. Her ladies-in-waiting, barring Dacey - who was certainly no one's lady-in-waiting, no, she was closer to Robb's pack than she was to hers - were sat in a circle, practicing their sewing and eating delicious lemon cakes and other niceties that had been placed on the round table between them all. Besides her on the right was Wylla, her long blonde hair reaching down to a little past her shoulders and allowed to flow freely, as was the Northern fashion, and on her left was Alys Karstark, who's brown hair reached all the way down to her waist.

Then, going around the table were girls from almost every major house in the North and definitely one from all the great branches. Just past Alys was Lysara Snowstark, who, even though she was only a year older than Sansa, was only a few inches shorter than the Smalljon. She always tried to make herself look smaller than she really was simply because she towered over most men, most of whom stood eye-level with her enviously plump bosom. Opposite her was the small Lyanna Swampstark who was only a little taller than her brother Brandon, despite being a maiden flowered. Whereas all the other Stark girls had grey eyes - besides Sansa, who had her mother's blue - she had a light shade of green from her crannogwoman mother, but she had the same brown hair. She was almost like a doll when compared to Lysara, but she was beautiful in her own way, with a soft face and a softer heart.

Then there were the Darkstark twins, Adara and Lyanne, utterly identical in both looks and dress, aside from the single ribbon they wore in their hair so people could tell the difference between them. Adara had a simple black one and Lyanne an orange, and though they dressed and looked the same, they acted differently. Adara had a fondness for men that went far beyond anything Septa Mordane would have approved of, though she had little interest in marriage. Lyanne, on the other hand, was friendly but not lustful like her sister, delicate, polite...and shy, at least around boys. She was very ladylike, southron almost, something that had made Catelyn fond of the young Darkstark. Then there was the young Greystark, the youngest lady there, a year younger than Arya, but she had grown mostly around Sansa...and of all, was the one closest to her. Little Lyra Greystark followed Sansa everywhere she could, happy to help and once she even carried messages between her and Domeric when the septa tried to keep them separate, for whatever reason. I wish she was a real sister, like Arya.

Then there were the others. Jeyne Poole, Eddara Flint, the younger sister of Robin Flint, Beth Cassel, even Serena Umber, the Greatjon's daughter who was the only one who even came close to Lysara in height.

Alys giggled as she saw Sansa peer out the window again. It was a colder day than the usual, so the tall Karstark girl was wearing a thick fur coat above her dress, just like Sansa. "You truly love him, don't you?"

She answered without a moments hesitation. "I do," then she smiled at the Karstark girl. "Just like you love my brother Robb."

Alys laughed, but Sansa could see the red coming onto her cheeks. Everyone knew how Alys and Wylla loved Robb...and that he was torn between the two. Both of them were from good, loyal and powerful families, both of them kept the Old Gods - Wylla had converted back years
before - and both the Manderlys and the Karstarks were interested in seeing a daughter married to him. Both of them had flowered on almost the same day and now they had their mooAnd both Wylla and Alys love him. Gods, I don't know which he will marry. I would be surprised if he doesn't just flip a coin... She sighed, but then the doors opened quietly as the Septa stepped in, smiling at the ladies she taught. Sansa did not keep the New Gods, she kept her father's gods, the gods of her ancestors and of all the Stark women who came before her. She was not some fragile southron, but a proud Northern woman and though she didn't don chainmail like Dacey, she certainly wasn't a fragile flower who was seen and never heard. She went to the sept with her mother because it was expected of her, her duty and the right thing to do, not because she wanted to or because she kept the New Gods.

She and most of the other ladies weren't fond of all the strictness of the Faith, how it separated them from their gods with septons and septas and so on, but there were some parts that she was interested in, like the seven holidays the Faith had, one for each of the New Gods. Mother's Day was a day to give thanks to the Mother, but the septon told her that in the south sons and daughters gave gifts to their own mothers, too, as thanks for bringing them into the world. It was a wonderful idea in her opinion, she had even surprised her mother once by getting her favorite flowers from the glass gardens for her, something she did every year now.

Septa Mordane walked around the table, smiling at their stitch work as she did. Even Northern ladies were expected to learn how to sew, but they didn't make soft, fragile clothes like they did in the south, they made hardy coats lined with soft fur to keep them warm in the coldest winters, thick gloves to protect their fingers from the biting wind and dresses that used cloth twice as thick as any beneath the Neck. Lysara's fat fingers and large hands were better suited for a smith's hammer than the bone sewing needle she had, which was as big as it could be and still be small enough to make the stitches properly. "Maybe it would be best if you had a knitting needle, instead?"

Lysara sighed in defeat, setting the needle, the thread and her work on the table. "I can't be any worse with it."

Sansa smiled at her reassuringly, hoping to cheer the giant woman. "You'll be better with a larger needle, I'm sure."

Lyra quickly nodded in agreement, smiling at her distant cousin.

"Jory," muttered Adara quietly between stitches. Huh?

"What do you mean?" she asked, not even looking at the cloth as she continued her sewing, creating a beautiful snowflake from blue thread as practice.

"We were talking about people we like. Jory's strong...and handsome, in his own way."

"Jory is a married man, Adara, with sons of his own." quickly pointed out the septa, "You shouldn't think of him like that. It's unladylike."

Beth nodded as she took a lemon cake. "He's happy, too."

"I only said that I liked him and that he was handsome, that's all...besides, Lord Stark is much better looking."

Sansa laughed as the septa turned red at Adara's words. The only reason the septa was there to teach them was because Catelyn had asked for it, not because any of the girls kept the New Gods or even
needed a septa to teach them. But for her mother, she was happy to listen to what the septa had to say, for her mother's sake. She tried to be the best daughter she could be, since she knew she had given her mother hell when she had been little, but she had grown out of it and had become ladylike by six. Not like Arya, though. She hasn't changed since she was a babe, my wild little sister. I hope she marries someone who likes her the way she is, someday. Father says she has the wolf blood, that we all have a little of it, but she has the most.

Before the septa could utter a word to the wanton and utterly shameless Darkstark, the door opened again and Dacey walked in, wearing leathers that made her seem like Arya made tall. She walked over and asked, "Have any of you seen Arya?"

The septa glared at her - wearing *leathers* was certainly not something any lady should do, but Dacey was more than just that. She could fight as well as any man, better than most even, she usually hunted in the woods with Robb and his friends, so it was no wonder Arya looked up to her the way Lyra did to Sansa. She took two walnuts from a bowl on the table, but she didn't bother to use the nutcracker besides them, she simply crushed them against one another one handed, the loud *crunch* making the septa wince.

"She's probably in the city again, why?" Sansa knew her sister well enough to know that she always went into the city whenever she could, even when their mother told her not to. She was like a shadow in how she could come and go with ease, vanishing in one part of the castle and then reappearing somewhere else, covered in dirt and grime but no worse for wear.

"Catelyn is wondering where she's ran off to again, the little wildling." Dacey sighed. "I best try and find her."

Sansa nodded as Dacey left to start her search. She was sure Arya had found a way to disappear into the walls, but she wasn't sure how - Arya had been left in a room on her own with a guard outside the door, once, and she *still* managed to get outside the keep...but no one saw her leave the room or try and climb out of her window. Septa Mordane had mostly given up on trying to make Arya ladylike, she never showed up to the septa's lessons and she *definitely* didn't have any interest in ever attending them, either. Their mother wished and prayed that Arya would finally relax and become a lady, but Brandon had wished to fly on an ice dragon once and it never happened. *There's more of a chance of him turning into an ice dragon than Arya turning into a southron lady.*

"How unladylike," sighed the septa. "She would certainly get along well with Lord Tarth's daughter..."

"I thought ladies in the south weren't allowed to fight?" asked Serana. "Aren't they just...left in towers?"

"Heavens no, Serana. They're given free roam of their castles and can do whatever they please, like play the harp, read or spend time with their children."

"Is that it?" she asked the old septa. "Is that *all* the ladies in the south do?" *I would go mad if that was all I did. I don't mind sewing and reading, but there are other things I like to do, like riding.*

"Not at all. They watch their sons, husbands and brothers ride at tournaments and can be crowned the Queen of Love and Beauty, or organize feasts and other such things." The septa added with a fond smile.

"But Dacey can go hunting, she could fight in the melee if so wanted to. Aren't there any women in
the south like her?"

The septa sighed. "A few...but it's frowned upon, for good reasons. Lady Tarth, for example. She is as much a warrior as Dacey, but she'll never find a husband because of it!"

"Didn't Jon want to marry Dacey before?" She still remembered Dacey turning red with stunned embarrassment after what he did, so she never even gave him a moment's thought before turning him down. *Had he done it in private...who knows what might've happened?*

The septa sighed. Then she stayed quiet as she continued looking at their sewing.

"Are there any ladies like me?" asked Adara with a smile, knowing full well what she was asking.

"In Dorne..." answered the septa quietly and with shame.

Wylla smiled as she showed their septa her stitch work: a perfect copy of the merman of her house, every detail and every color correct. "Well done, Wylla, it's beautiful! Your old septa would be very proud, I'm sure."

"Thank you."

Sansa reached over for a lemon cake. They were her favorite, everyone knew, but she was careful to avoid eating too many. They could only grow a few lemons in the glass gardens and the rest had to be shipped up from Dorne and the Reach, alongside oranges, melons and peaches. *Every castle in the North has a glass garden, but ours are the biggest.* She took a bite of the small and sweet cake, then she set her own sewing on the tabletop for the septa to see. Then, when she was done with the lemon cake, she rose from her seat.

"Where are you going?" asked the septa. *She knows I'm the reason most of the ladies are here.*

"I'm just going for a walk, I'll be back soon."

The septa nodded and as Sansa started towards the door, half the ladies rose from their seats to follow and then the other half did the same, leaving the septa on her own...aside from Lyanne, who looked to the septa. "Can I go with them?"

"You may."

Only then did the shy but polite girl rise from her seat to follow Sansa outside and into the heart of the castle. Warmth flowed from the floors and walls, the pipes buried inside the masonry carrying hot water from the springs beneath the keep to every room, easily warming those few without hearths, even more so in the bathhouse where the pipes went beneath the tubs and kept them hot even in the midst of winter. She led her friends down the steps and outside, into the bright sun, just in time to see Robb look over and smile at Alys...who gladly smiled back as her cheeks turned a pale red. She laughed as Domic stopped playing, then she walked through the courtyard to the rear of the castle, where the godswood had stood long before the castle had been built, never changing as the castle grew around it and then the city around the castle.

Cuttings and seeds from the ancient heart tree had been used to grow all the other wierwoods in the city, even the young ones in the marketplace. The warm ponds bubbled and misted into the air amongst the old trees and truly ancient stones. It was a serene place, peaceful. Stark men and women had come to pray for centuries, or just to find some peace in their day to day lives.
But she had another use for it. *Because it's never hard to find him here after he leaves his chambers.*

"My sweet lady Sansa," spoke her love quietly from beneath an oak tree not far from the wierwood, silver harp in hand. "Did you enjoy my music?"

She smiled at Domeric, a loving, tender smile. He had his father's eyes, and the same face, they even walked the same, but he was everything his father wasn't: loving, warm and friendly. His hair was neatly cut and kept short, the same blackish-brown that his mother had. He never talked much, even to her, but he was the kindest, most loving man she had ever met. Others had tried to court her before, but none of them had ever gotten close to making her feel the way he had...and still could. She walked over and sat on the ground besides him, her ladies gathering around idly. They were going to be husband and wife one day, she knew, and nothing could make her happier. *He's even friends with Robb! He's perfect!*

"I always do."

He smiled at her as he raised his harp and strummed the first few notes of another song, a long song, but a somber one, one she knew well. "The Winter Maid, though the maiden in the song is certainly not as beautiful as you."

She giggled as she rested her head upon his shoulder and let him play, just as she had so many times before.

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**End of Part 3!**

Chapter End Notes

I'll say it now: sorry. Writing this part was a frigging slog, up hill through a blizzard with Others all around. It was very hard to make this part actually work, and even now I'm not entirely happy with it. It's hard to describe, but something just doesn't...feel right with it. It's probably caused by the part taking a couple of days to finish skewing some things, but I'm not sure. Still, if it's unreadable and just flat out horrible, just say and I'll try and rewrite the thing till it's better!

Though I'm sure future Sansa parts won't be quite as...problematic as this one, to say the least

Anyhow, to recap, as I always do at the end of my parts!

Sansa really, really loves Domeric, as if that wasn't obvious enough. However, he should sound a little...familiar, for reasons that should be very, very clear. He loves to play the harp - and is exceptionally good at it - then he has a truly ravenous appetite for learning about the past and is generally quiet and friendly. He's a really good guy, friends with Robb Stark and enjoys riding horses, certainly, he'll be a great jouster as he gains more experience and gets older.

Oh, and he's courting a Stark girl. Hmmm...I wonder who this is like.
Oh boy, Robert Baratheon is going to have fun with him, that's for sure

Sansa's not quite the perfect and mild mannered lady she was in canon, instead, she's a Northern lady. Now, I don't mean she's wild like Arya or Lyanna, she's not, but she's not southron, either. She doesn't mind sewing, but she likes to ride horses, go on walks, that kind of thing, but she also loves her sister, even if she can be a pain in the backside sometimes

And we also see a lot of Northern ladies in this part, too! Wylla hasn't got green hair simply because she hasn't dyed it, but more importantly, she converted back to the Old Gods. We'll see more about that in more politically minded parts further on, once all the Starks have had their part. But they vary from one another, certainly.

And of course, Lyanne should sound a lot like Lysa...before she married Jon Arryn. This leads me to something else : because Northern culture is stronger and more people have First Men style ideals and the like, Catelyn is a little more isolated than she would be in canon. Oh, she still loves her children and Eddard, certainly, but she's alone in that she is one of the few in the city who have southron values, but this'll be covered more deeply in her part.

Now...some of you are probably wondering why there is the traditional mix of Stark style names (Lyanna, Lyanne, Lysara and so on), and then Adara. The reason for this is that Adara is the name of the girl from the Ice Dragon and I mean the version published in 1980. That book is sort of the grandfather to ASOIAF, hell, it even mentions the North.

However, that version of the North has dragons.

So, I didn't think it would do too much harm to have that as a Northern name, as a little nod to that which created the franchise we all know and love :p

Oh, and if I remember right it also gives us a clue towards the origin of the Others : the girl is cold emotionally as well physically and her mother died giving birth to her because, "the cold of the long night touched Adara while she was still in the womb."

I don't think it's much of a leap for Jory to be married in this timeline, either. He's not married to anyone of high nobility, but he is happily married with children of his own.
Arya put her ear up against the warm wall of her chamber, quietly listening out for any movement inside the castle's halls. Sometimes, the guards who tried so hard to keep her inside the castle at her mother's request would walk down the hall and stay there instead of standing outside her door, hoping to catch her as she left her room. But that never works. I don't leave my room by going out the door. She smiled to herself as the guard walked a few feet away, only to stop and wait for her to try and escape. She had been in a chamber close to the ballroom, once, but her mother had moved her higher up the castle to try and stop her from leaving. But Arya had found the perfect method, one that never required her to even walk out the castle gate to leave it.

She changed out of the uncomfortable dress her mother made her wear, and into the leathers her father had given her for ninth name day. He knew that, no matter what he tried, she would always find a way to escape and would ruin any dress she wore in the process. So, he had gotten her tough, hard wearing boiled leathers, like the ones Dacey wore around Winterfell, knowing that she adored the proud, strong Mormont she-bear. Catelyn still tried to try and make her a lady, but it was a losing battle and one that she was trying to fight less and less as Arya grew older. She tiptoed across the room, putting on her tough leather boots and thick gloves...then she lay on the floor and rolled beneath her bed that had been pushed as far as it could be against the wall opposite the door, her drawers covering the other side.

Years ago, when she was much smaller, she had been playing in her room when she slipped and fell against the stone walls of her chamber when she was still downstairs...and to her surprise, the block she hit slid back into the wall. The keep had thinner walls on the inside than it did on the outside, to allow heat to pass through the brick work from the pipes that had been placed in the small gaps in between...and by chance, she had found a block that had come loose over the centuries. The block had slid backwards, into the gap between the outside walls and the inside ones, just enough room for a man to squeeze inside to mend the pipes in case they ever burst. She had carefully moved the block back to its place, but she never said a word to anyone about it happening, not a soul.

Eventually, she had been moved from that room and a mason noticed the loose brick during an inspection and mortared it back into place, sealing that entrance, but she had made another in her new chamber, beneath her bed so that no one would ever find it, not without taking all her furniture out and even then they needed a trained eye to notice the difference between it and all the others. They'll never know! She smiled as she slowly pushed the block back into the opening inside the wall, just enough that she could squeeze into the opening. Then she crept forward ever so slowly, careful to not make a sound. Hot air brushed past her face from the dark passageway, but she continued, putting her arms inside and pulling herself in. The broad copper pipes that heated Winterfell loomed all around her, like metal tree trunks, rising from and climbing into darkness. There were only a few stone walkways that the builders had used centuries ago, but it was too dark to see them properly, too risky that she could miss a step and fall to her death in the abyss below.

Carefully, she reached out onto a pipe. The copper was thick, soft and as hot as boiling water, but the fixtures that held them in place were made from iron and cold enough to hold. She grabbed hold of the fitting with one hand, then she pushed the block back into it's place...removing her only source of light. She had done this a hundred times before and would do it a hundred times again, but she had
never, would never, get used to the complete, suffocating darkness that surrounded her. Her eyes were useless, so she listened carefully for the quiet flow of the water inside the pipes and used her hands to find the fitting. Carefully...

She put both hands on the fitting and then stepped off the platform and onto the pipe, finding another set of fittings beneath her feet where the pipe branched into a dozen smaller ones to warm the floor beneath her chamber. The air was filled with dust and damp, making her throat itch.

Through the wall, she heard the sound of her door's hinges.

"Arya, it's time for your...lessons?"

Her mother sighed as the guard rushed into the room.

"Others be damned, she's escaped! I was watching the door, she never left the room!"

Catelyn sighed again, then she heard the patter of footsteps as she walked out the room, leaving the guard to search for her, even though she knew he would never find her inside the wall.

Her throat tingled, pleading with her to cough the dirt away. Her footing was safe upon the pipes below, but if she coughed, the guard would hear...and she would never be able to use the tunnels again. It had taken her weeks to loosen the block enough that she had been able to move it, not like the first loose block, but if they knew she had been using the passageways they would simply move her into a room in the center of the keep, away from any of the outside walls and keep a guard outside the door, just in case.

The itching turned to burning, so she did the only thing she could. She took her right hand from the iron fitting and and bit down on it.

Then she coughed. The sound was silent, or so she hoped. Finally, the guard sighed.

"I'll never know how she does it..."

She placed her hand back on the rail and smiled as the guard left, his footsteps growing quieter as he got further and further away.

That was close.

She smiled, then she crouched down and reached to the next fitting below her, knowing exactly where it was by memory from all the times she had done it before. When she felt the familiar shape in her grip, she grabbed it with her other hand and very carefully rolled off the pipe, never loosening her vise-like grip till she was against the copper again. I know that if I fall...they might never find me...but it's worth the risk! A wolf shouldn't be caged in, ever! The hardest part of her escape was done, but now she had to descend into the hungry void beneath her, one that she had only ever seen lit by candlelight. I had to stop using candles, though. I couldn't explain where they were going. She wrapped her legs around the hot copper pipe, feeling the warmth burning it's way through her leggings, then she quickly threw her arms around it and slid down to the next fitting. They were there to hold the pipes upright, so that they didn't start to bend under their own weight, but they made the perfect handholds.

She quickly let go of the pipe and grabbed the next fitting. The cold iron was much more comfortable to hold through her gloves than the hot copper. She panted for breath in the heat, resting
for a little while. It had been much harder when she had first started using the tunnels to leave. Her arms had been smaller, weaker, burning from the exertion after just a few descents, but like hot steel being bathed in a vat of cold water it had made her harder and stronger. *I'll be just as strong as Dacey one day.* She held herself on with one hand as she brushed sweat from her face before she continued climbing down, wrapping herself around the pipe and sliding down, just like before.

She heard a proud man speaking on the other side of the wall, his voice having an accent she couldn't place. He was obviously a nobleman, though, she could tell by how confident he spoke.

"...of soldiers, trained to fight as a group and not as warriors in single combat, not like the other peoples of the world at the time...they were a -"

She heard her brother instantly reply. "A pack."

*I can hear anything in the castle, if I can get to the rooms.*

She quietly stepped onto another set of pipes, the ones that led into whatever room was besides her, quietly moving as her brother continued talking strategy with the unknown man. *I wish I was taught that instead of learning how to sew...* She sighed, then she continued on her way down, into the bowels of the castle. As Robb's voice faded away, she heard another coming from the room below.

"...Salladhor Saan is the greatest threat to our merchantmen, my lord. They call him the "Prince of the Narrow Sea", but if you give me leave to attack his lair in the Stepstones...I'll make his reign a short one, aye, and tow the *Valyrian* back as a prize, too."

She recognized the voice from one of his many visits: Rickard Seastark. His brother ruled the lands of his family, so he commanded their fleet...and the open seas were more his home than any castle, now. The Seastarks and the Manderlys shared the duty of protecting the North's trade with the Free Cities and the east coast, while the Mormonts and the Darkstarks protected the western coast. He was older than her father, his brown hair having long turned as grey as his eyes, but with his age had come experience and on either side of the Narrow Sea he was known as a seasoned commander of ships and a pirate hunter...and he was like a grandfather to her. He had never had any daughters of his own, while all his nieces had died either in the womb or in the cradle, so he loved her as if she were both. He told her stories about his travels and visits to the Free Cities, but he also sometimes brought her presents from across the Narrow Sea as proof, even though she never doubted him.

Her father replied after a moment's thought, "Take as many ships as you need to put an end to his attacks, once and for all."

She continued her way down, but this time, she saw a flickering light from the bottom, an orange glow from the torches in the cellars shining up from a grate, the lone light in the ocean of darkness. It was the entrance that the builders used when they were inspecting the pipes or replacing the iron fittings, as the only alternative was to smash their way through the walls of the castle itself with sledgehammers and picks, which was as awkward and tedious as it was costly. She looked away from the light, but kept going down, keeping her mind focused on the things she couldn't see instead of those that she could. The wet, swamplike heat of the tunnels gave way to a drier cold as she got closer and closer to the bottom, the draft rising past her and working its way through her leathers to the damp skin beneath. She was used to the cold, everyone in the North was, but to be sweating from the heat and then suddenly surrounded by the cold again would make an Other shiver, but it was relaxing, like staying in Winterfell's bathhouse for a while before diving into the ponds.

*We don't bathe like they do in the south. They sit in tubs of warm water, but we use steam and sit*
around hot coals with our friends...but we do have baths like they do, too.

That manner of bathing was even popular among the common, as it was easy to afford the fuel and the one building could serve many roles; food could be cooked on the coals, the building was big enough to live in and many women gave birth in them, like her grandmother had when she brought her father into the world, though her mother preferred a birthing bed. There was nothing in the world half as relaxing as sitting in the steam in the midst of a cold winter...though the people of the south thought there was something perverse about the Night's Watch doing it for an hour's relief from the cold, calling them "sword swallowers" and other foul things. Every fitting brought her a little closer to the grate at the bottom, a little closer to being able to wander the streets of Winterfell away from the restrictions her mother tried so hard to put on her. The light grew brighter as she got closer, then finally, she stepped down onto cold, wet stone and not another layer of pipes.

She dried her hands on her breeches as best as she could, then she listened out for the sounds of anyone moving in the buttery, peeking through the gaps between the gaps...only daring to move again when she was sure there was no one around to see her.

Carefully, she gripped the old grate and pulled. It was heavy, too heavy for her, but she didn't need to lift it high, just enough to raise the edge, just enough that she could slide it far enough for her to fit past. I've done this before...but it's still hard!

There was a clunk as it raised out of place, and she turned red as she used all her strength to heave it across the damp masonry, careful to avoid making too much noise that could be heard over the sound of the kitchens cluttering above her. She was strong, as strong as Bran if not stronger, but the grate was meant to be lifted by grown men, masons used to hammering and hewing at blocks for hours on end, but she managed to move it just enough, just barely, that she could slip through...even if it was a tight fit.

She placed her arms on either side of the opening and lowered herself down, easy when compared to her earlier climb. Her brother Brandon used to climb the towers of Winterfell before he learnt he could soar above them in the body of an eagle, and she had done the same before her mother forced her to stop..and Ned had agreed with her, saying that it was too dangerous because of how tall the towers were, and that a strong gust of wind or a loose stone would send her plummeting to her death.

She stopped climbing them.

Her mother tried to stop her from doing many things, but her father was happy to let her be how she wanted to be. He let her go hunting with Robb, go riding with Dacey, anything she wanted to do within reason, so when he told her not to do something, she never did it. But now, her mother was finally starting to give up on trying to turn her into a lady, but that didn't bother Arya whatsoever.

She reached up and moved the grate back into position before taking a quick look around. She was beneath Winterfell, in the buttry where they stored the ales, beers and all the other drinks for the serving men-at-arms of the castle. On either side of her were shelves packed with casks of ale and beer, with even more stacked neatly against the rear wall behind her. Ahead of her were four huge tuns with chunky taps and iron ribs as wide as her hands that held the ales as they aged and between the monstrous barrels were shelves of wooden kegs, suckling babes when compared to the giants all around them. A few torches lit the cellar well enough and from the smell of cooking meat and the clamor of utensils, she knew they were already starting to work in the kitchens above. They'll be coming for the ale, soon.

Arya quickly moved behind the tun on her right, then waited a brief moment before moving again, in
case anyone started to come down the steps opposite her on the left. She waited after every move, even if only for a few seconds - it was hard to tell exactly where the cooks were over the noise - so she made sure none of them were coming before moving again, just in case. They'd ask how I got down here, I wouldn't know what to say. She knew where every room in Winterfell was, even the ones beneath the castle. Just further ahead was the granaries where they kept food for winter, then the cisterns were just opposite that, doing the same but for water instead. Then past that was the bottlery, where they kept the wine, but it was a smaller room than the buttery and not her way out, either...but besides that was a tunnel that joined the Great Keep to the First Keep, the ancient and squat fortress that had been its predecessor thousands of years ago. So many sons and daughters of the lords of the North had been sent to Winterfell - more coming every generation - that it was a challenge to house all of them with quarters fitting their status, so the First Keep had been restored in the days of her grandfather's grandfather.

She had seen maps of Winterfell from then, from a time when the city was a growing town and the barbicans were still being raised. Nowadays, the castle itself was like a town in its own right, with scores of armorers, poleturners, swordsmiths and fletchers working and living inside the walls. Mikken was but the first of many blacksmiths who had the hard duty of ensuring that the city watch and the castle guards always had weapons and armor...and that they were in good condition, too. She started to creep forward again, only allowing herself to relax after she had left the buttery and was in the quiet halls below the castle. There was no one there, not even a guard, even though there was a stairwell that led behind the Great Hall. She walked openly, unafraid of being found and dragged to her boring lessons.

I hate sewing...why does she keep trying to make me like her?

Arya sighed. She and her mother had never been as close as they could've been. When Arya had been a child so young she was still in swaddling, her mother had hoped that she would grow up to be more ladylike than her sister, more southron, but her dream of having a daughter like her had come crashing down as Arya grew older and older. First, when she learnt how to run and after her brother was born, she had played games in the castle with her brother Bran, ruining every dress she owned, even the ones Catelyn had made for her, but her sister Sansa had done the same except with Robb, Jon and all the others. Then she had grown more defiant with every nameday, attending the lessons of the septa less and less, never going with Catelyn to the sept...and then she met Dacey.

She was everything Arya ever dreamed of being. She was strong, fierce and proud, an honorable warrior. But above all, she was independent. She didn't need a husband to protect her, to provide for her or to take her from one place to another. She could crush wildlings and knights alike with her mace, she could hunt as well as any of her brothers and she certainly didn't need any help getting around. She can mount up on her horse and just...ride, anywhere she wants, whenever she wants to. She could go fight across the Narrow Sea, or enter a melee in a tournament, or go hunting or anything other than sewing! But Catelyn won't even let me go into the city without two dozen guards! Robb and Jon go by themselves!

Nothing frustrated her more than having to fight such an uphill battle with her own mother, especially when her father was so understanding of her and everything she wanted to do. He never once tried to contain her, no, he let her roam free and wide, allowing her to be the she-wolf she was and not trying to make her into a fragile winter rose.

She walked past the thick, reinforced oaken doors that led to the cisterns and granaries, then in front of her loomed the much weaker door made from pine, the entrance to the bottlery. In a siege, food and water became far more valuable than any bottle of wine. Drunks can't fight. They just shamble, like the wights in Old Nan's stories. There was a quiet working inside the room, the occasional patter
of tools as they made sure every barrel and every bottle was properly sealed. But she didn't care about that, she cared about the door besides her that was there so that meals and drink could be taken through to the First Keep if needed, or to let Robb's friends make it back to their chambers in winter if too much snow had fallen. Behind it was a metal gate, she knew, one that was always left open in day for anyone wandering between the two buildings, but closed and locked at night. She smiled as she opened the door...only to hear the clank of chainmail and a painful grunt as the door hit someone on the other side.

"Hey!" yelled the guard in anger...but his tone made it clear he didn't recognize who she was. He would have never dared to raise his voice if he had.

The dirt on her clothes and in her hair had made her look much poorer than she really was, like a serving boy and not the highborn "lady" she really was. It was her best disguise, since she didn't have to do anything to make her look any different than she normally did. All she had to do was put on her normal leathers and then go through the tunnels. The moisture and heat made the dirt and dust stick to her so well it was impossible to get it all off without having her clothes washed and then bathing, either in the southern fashion or the northern one.

He was young, tall and strong, too, with rough long features and only a few brown hairs making it out from beneath his kettle helm and coif...but he had the same grey eyes, too. His hauberk stretched to just past his knees, wedged between two layers of leather and fastened with a strong belt. Had he been wearing a coat of plate on top, he would've recognized her instantly, as those were only common amongst the household guard, the best swords and crossbowmen in the castle. He swayed ever-so-slightly as he stood in front of her...and smelled like ale.

"Sorry," she apologized, keeping her head down towards the ground as if in shame, ensuring he couldn't see her face properly.

"Where are you going, anyway? You don't even have anything in your hands! You're not suppose'd to use the tunnel as you please!"

She sighed. *It was going so well.*

She looked him dead in the eye and watched as he realized who he was talking to, his entire posture and tone changed in an blink.

"Mi'lady! I didn't recog-"

"Stay quiet," she demanded without any softness in her voice, the same lordly tone her father used, though hers was more like a mummer's acting than his. "You didn't see me."

"But your lady mother has asked for you to be taken to her."

Arya crossed her arms, as Dacey usually did at times like this. "You're going to take me to my mother while smelling like ale?"

The guard sighed. "Please don't tell Jory, or anyone."

Arya smiled at the guard. "I didn't see you, if you didn't see me."

He paused for a moment...then he nodded and stepped to the side to let her pass before going through the door himself and leaving her alone in the tunnel. It left her confused as she walked...
through the tunnel to the First Keep. Why was the guard in the basement in the first place? There had never been one beneath the castle before and she had made the descent from her room a hundred times, never once being caught. Had they finally started to figure out how she was leaving the castle? It was bound to happen eventually, but how did they figure it out?

*Maybe the guard was just thirsty?*

The tunnel connecting the Great Keep with the First Keep was long, but well lit and warm, with the smooth granite blocks and the earth around them keeping out most of the cold, while warmth from both keeps and the torches on the walls warmed it. At the far end of the tunnel was another door, the exact same as the one she had walked through before. *There shouldn't be any more guards...Unless they know this is how I get out.* She kept moving, opening the door and going up the stairs, into the ground floor of the First Keep. It was much smaller than the one she lived in, but it was still a large, strong building, with gargoyles watching over the courtyard like stony sentinels. The interior was well furnished, far better than it had been when it had first been built thousands of years ago, with some rooms that were no longer needed - like the lord's solar - being turned either into storage or into new chambers for the lords and ladies that had come to Winterfell. Now, it was like one large house, with a common room on the ground floor in what had used to be the little keep's own hall, with the stairwell just outside the entrance to the room and directly opposite the door. She crept up the stairs, onto the ground floor...then she heard snoring from inside the hall.

*...Oh, this is just evil.*

She peeked around the corner and saw Eddard Karstark asleep at the table in only his breeches, catching up on sleep after training, with a cup of wine besides him. From the door in the back of the room, Torrhen stepped into the hall...holding a branch of birch tightly with both hands, careful to avoid making too much sound. He saw her in the doorway...and mouthed her name before placing a finger over his mouth to keep her quiet.

Then he shouted, at the top of his voice.

"*It's steam time, Edd!*"

Edd snapped awake, barely getting out a sound before his brother sprung into action. "What -"

Torr swung the branch, the leaves hitting his brother on the back with a loud *crack*, half the twigs snapping instantly and drawing thin tears of blood.

Eddard threw himself from the table and straight towards his brother, who burst into a sprint as fast as he could, laughing as his tired brother slammed into the cold, hard floor with a soft, painful thump. Eddard shouted every curse she knew about...and a few she didn't, then charged after his brother, into the back of the keep.

She laughed as she walked outside, into the cold but bright day. *No southron would ever birch themselves...but our men do it all the time when they bathe. It gets the blood flowing.*
From there, it was a simple walk out the castle, so long as she kept her head down and didn't draw any attention to herself. She looked towards the ground as she walked, hands in her pockets, raising her shoulders a little higher to make herself look a little more masculine. Carts rolled past her, bringing all sorts of goods to the castle, whether they be iron ingots for the smiths, granite boulders for the masons or slabs of meat and baskets of vegetables for the cooks. A few guards looked around curiously, no doubt looking for her, but none of them managed to recognize her as she walked. Winterfell's walls were high and strong, dotted with tall round towers and with enough hoardings in storage for every section of wall in times of war. But more prominent were the reddish-white symbols on the walls, made from a mix of wierwood bark and sap, water and egg whites, protective runes drawn directly onto the masonry and allowed to harden, promising to protect the defenders and her family from harm, so long as they stayed within.

Maester Luwin doesn't think they do anything, he thinks that since people believe they're safe it'll make them fight harder...but I don't know. She couldn't read many of them, but the ones she could read said "home" "protect" and "fight." Not many people in the North could read an entire phrase of them, even less below the Neck, but the Green Men from the Isle of Faces could not only read them all, but write them. They had a group in the North, men who were as silent as the Old Gods and tended to the wierwood trees and ensured they were in good health. They took cuttings from the largest wierwoods and used them to grow new ones in the towns, cities and castles that were springing up across the North like mushrooms after a summer's rain. They carved the faces now that the Children of the Forest were gone...and some thought that a few of them had the greensight, and that every single one of them was a master warg.

But no one could know for sure. All they knew was that only they wrote the runes on the walls...and that they came every time they needed to be rewritten, even when they hadn't yet been called. They spoke and met with lords only rarely, but whenever they did they spoke as the voice of the Old Gods and none in the North ever ignored what they had to say. Why would we?

She walked into the city, into the bustling and busy streets. The people were going about their day to day lives, shopping in the markets, praying in the godswoods, going to and from their workshops. She relished in the feeling that no one in the crowd knew she was a noblewoman, that she was Arya Stark of Winterfell and not some common boy. She happily walked through the streets of the city, looking around at the shops and people. The shops so close to the castle were the wealthiest, larger and better built, with the odd one out being a bakery that had a glass front for some reason. Don't they know they lose heat through the glass?

She walked into one of the alleyways, always curious to see more of the city that was her home. The streets closest to the castle were all cobblestone, dotted with trees along the sides besides the gutters. The houses usually had a dozen people inside, if not more, and were strongly built if sparingly decorated. But there were statues, of the great Stark heroes from ages long since past, even though they were buried in the crypts below, with their direwolves besides them even in death. They stood tall and proud, giants made from bronze, the eldest of which had started to turn green with time. The North was fond of sculptures and statues: they were eternal, ageless, just as the North was. The kingdom had seen castles rise and fall across the world, armies march from glorious victory to crushing defeat, pretenders rallying and dying upon bloody meadows, but the North had remained throughout it all, for eight thousand years the Starks had stood unbroken. What was the Seven Kingdoms to such agelessness, but the blink of an eye, a single moment that would be swept away by the winds of history?

They watched as they had always watched, and she smiled at the statue of a she-wolf from the past, Alayne Stark, called the Fishwife, because she spent her days gutting squids whenever the opportunity presented itself. She had short hair, all the better to fit beneath her great helm and wore a
hauberk, carrying sword and shield into battle...and besides her was her direwolf, a she-wolf that was as fierce as her master. She had only stopped fighting the Ironborn when her brother took Bear Island from them in a wrestling match, but till then she had eagerly boarded their ships and fought the raiders on their own vessels, or took them by surprise whenever they came ashore. On an open beach where the Ironborn had just landed, a direwolf was dangerous...but when she caught them by surprise on their own ships and boarded them, they were deadly. She was so eager for life at sea and in battle that her brother gave her the task of protecting the trade routes of the Narrow Sea, making her the first of the Seastarks after she married one of her cousins and set to work building her lands into a port.

_I wish I had a direwolf..._

The cobblestone streets gave way to rough dirt paths as she moved away from the wealthiest part of the city and into the poorer sections where most of the people lived and worked. There weren't any statues here, but they still had godswoods, and every godwood had its own heart tree around which the people would pray. The buildings around her were still large, so as to house any cousins or family they might have had outside of the city in winter, but they were more cheaply built and mostly made from wood, not stone. Some had steam baths, but they were few and far between, shared amongst friends and family and sometimes used for other things, like smoking meats. The city watch were out in force, patrolling the city in squads and always watched from above by wargs in their golden eagles. Each group of men had two crossbowmen, a weapon that was beloved by the guards for how easy they were to use and maintain, not to mention how they could be loaded and carried around on a long patrol, ready to be fired in a moments notice. But more importantly, they were led by veteran watchmen, those who had served the watch for ten years and been given the authority by her father to pass sentences on his behalf. _Our way is the old way...but he can't be everywhere. He needs the guards to deal with most of the regular crimes so he can deal with more important things._

There weren't as many guards as there were in the other cities of Westeros, but they were better equipped...and ever present. Their wargs allowed them to see every crime in the city, then deal with them when the opportunity presented itself. They were everywhere, and no crime in the streets of Winterfell ever went unpunished, which is why she found her mother's insistence that she be escorted into the city so strange. Why did she need guards, when the streets were so safe? Further down the street, she saw a group of the Snowcloaks - because their blue cloaks were covered in large white spots - armored with brigandines over leather, thick boots and open faced sallets, with a variety of weapons.

And following them...was a bear, with reddish brown fur covered in scars and with long, thick claws that looked as though someone had put them against a whetstone and sharpened them. The group walked along the road, people stopping to watch as the bear walked towards one of the houses and tapped on the door with its claws three times. The guards walked over, talking amongst themselves, then the leader of the group, more heavily armored than the others and wielding an axe walked past the bear and smashed the hinges with three swings of his heavy weapon.

Then the bear walked inside, followed by the others. Shouts echoed from inside, alongside the bear's fierce roar, but then the group walked out casually, as though they had never been there in the first place...except this time, being held in the bear's arms was a grown man, struggling against its grip.

"I didn't steal anything!" he shouted, pleading with the men to let him go.

The sergeant laughed. "Aye, you did." He walked over to the defenseless man and reached a mailed hand into the left pocket of the man's breeches...and pulled out a silver ring, decorated with beautiful, gleaming sapphires.
The thief went as pale as snow and fell silent. An eagle had simply watched him go home after he stole the ring, then a group of guards had went there at their leisure. *No one can hide from them, except me.* The guards of the North were happy to give their prisoners the opportunity to go to the Wall: there was honor in serving the Watch, and a chance to redeem one's crimes in the eyes of the gods...and when a crime such as stealing was to either lose a hand or take the black, many chose the latter rather than live the rest of their life as a cripple and as a burden on their family. *The southrons might not remember the honor of the Night's Watch, but we do.* The guards walked off as the bear carried the thief away, the warg inside it protected inside the quarters of the city watch, where they were teaching her brother how to spread his wings and how to take an animal.

*He still wants to join the Kingsguard, even as a warg. He'll be the first.*

She stretched before continuing on her walk, to a nearby godswood to rest for a little after her long climb and longer walk. It was a large wood, dozens of trees of all kinds scattered around, and in the center was a happy wierwood with a wide smile, crying red tears of joy, surrounded by quiet ponds that rippled in the low breeze and covered by the shadows of strong oaks that were only half as grand as the red leafed heart tree. Worshipers were gathered around in a silent circle of a dozen rings, praying towards the tree, the only sound being the quiet murmur of the city and the rustling leaves as the wind blew through them. Their gods had no priests, no septs, no texts, nothing to separate a man from the gods they worshiped in their own way. All they had were the wierwoods and the Green Men to tend to them.

"Hello, little wolf," spoke an old and wise voice behind her. She turned to see a tall man, dressed entirely from head to heel in an flowing robe of green cloth, sewn together in such a way as to make it look like a dress of leaves. His belt was like bark, and in the darkness of his hood she saw a mask as white as bone, covering his entire face...aside from his kindly, emerald green eyes.

He had seen through her disguise without even seeing her face, and he patted her on the shoulder lightly. "Your mother is worried. She fears something might happen to you. Are you not afraid?"

"No," she answered calmly. She knew the risks of leaving the castle, but even for a simple and brief walk on her own it was worth it.

"Good...there is no reason to be afraid. The gods are watching over you, little wolf. No harm shall come to you, for as long as you stay where they can see."

She smiled. *If he thinks I'm safe outside the castle, then I must be.* "Can't you tell my mother that? Make her let me leave the castle when I want?"

The wise man chuckled.

"I am afraid not, little wolf. She is simply doing what she believes is right. No god could ever fault a mother for doing what they thought was best for their kin. Is there nothing you wouldn't do for your pack?"

"No."

She loved her family, all of them, even her sister and her friends. Her brothers had smuggled her out of the castle on more than one occasion, with Robb and Jon even taking her hunting with them when they could. Her father told them all about how the lone wolf dies but the pack survives...and they had learnt the lesson better than he could have ever imagined. They might not always get along with one
another, but a pack of wolves had a feud every once in a while and they were no different. She might have been jealous of Robb and Jon being able to leave the castle whenever they wanted to, but that never stopped her from loving them. *We're a family, we look after each other.*

He nodded, surely smiling behind his mask, then he walked towards the tree, through the rings of worshipers...and he muttered something, a phrase in a tongue she didn't know, and when she blinked he had a bronze dagger in his hand. He carefully examined the wierwood, then on one of the stronger branches that were closer to the ground he carefully pulled down one of the mature but still new parts, careful to avoid breaking it. Then, with the bronze knife in hand, he made a small round cut around the branch, then another two inches further up.

Then he stripped the flesh between, deep enough to get to the true wood inside, making his hands sticky with crimson sap as he spoke words of the Old Tongue. He said something else as he reached into his robe with the other hand - dagger vanishing into nothingness as he did - and pulled out a bag of cloth and a wineskin. He packed it with earth from all around him, then he got his dagger again - saying the strange phrase before it appeared - then he cut through the open part of the branch, wiped it and uncorked the wineskin, pouring a mixture of honey and water onto the open part of the tree before driving it into the soil inside the bag, deep enough to take root.

Then he picked it all up and walked over to her again, tree held in both hands.

"Oh, by the way, would you mind keeping your brother away from any towers? For a few months?"

"Why?" she asked. "He doesn't like climbing anymore. He likes to fly instead."

The robed man nodded in silence.

Then he quietly said as the winds started to pick up, the leaves of the wierwood rustling more vigorously. "The branches of fate have been broken, little wolf. Not even the gods can know for certain what will come to pass now."

He sighed as she stared at him in confusion. The winds settled. "I must go now, little wolf. This tree is to go to a new town in Brandon's Gift, then I shall head north of the Wall." His tone lightened, "I hope we meet again, little wolf."

She nodded and the robed man walked away, holding the tree across his shoulder and the sack in both hands without either seeming to slow him down.

Finally, he called out to her from down the street, a single sentence before he continued on his way. "You will know what to do tomorrow, little wolf."

*Huh?*

She opened her mouth to ask him what he meant, but he disappeared into the crowds, even with the red hands of the wierwood over his shoulder. She blinked, then started to follow him, trying to trace his steps, but there wasn't a sign of him...aside from a single red leaf, left upon the ground and carried away in a cold breeze. Sighing, Arya turned back towards the wealthier part of town, knowing that she would have to return to the castle soon, else her mother might have the entire garrison sent out in search of her, like she had before, when Arya had fallen asleep beneath a pine tree in one of the godswoods. She had so utterly lost track of time that she had left after breaking her fast with her family, then woke just before dinner. She took a different path through the city, one where she looped around the godswood and into the city's main artery, the road from the marketplace to the
gatehouse. It was a sprawling, busy road filled with carts of all shapes and sizes, drawn by horses, men and oxen. There were more statues there, taller, but besides them were posts of bronze as tall as a man, lamps filled with cow fat that burnt like great candles, to light the streets in the dark winters and early nights of the North.

They were a common sight in the more busy parts of the city, the parts where the merchants sold their goods and where the wealthy made their homes, but they were becoming more common in other parts of the city. Bronze was easy enough to make in the North; they still knew where all their best copper and tin mines were from centuries before, even if they weren't being used to make weapons and armor anymore. They made it safer to walk the streets of the city at night, but more importantly it let people see where they were going even in a snowstorm. Everyone knew the story of the man who had went out from his home to get more firewood only to get lost in the city and freeze to death after finally finding his street again. They only found him when the snow thawed. Old Nan told me the story, but Robb swears its true.

The marketplace was busier now than it was earlier, and her belly growled at her as the rich smell of freshly baked bread wafted through the air from the same bakery that had the glass window. She could smell the sweet apple pies and spicy mint pastries from down the road, and when she walked over she looked through the glass window longingly at a small triangular pastry, cooked to golden perfection and sprinkled with sugar that sparkled in the light like diamonds. A thin waft of steam rose from a tiny hole in the top, carrying the splendid scent of slightly spiced apple...and her mouth began to water. She rummaged through her clothes for her coin purse, finding it in her breeches and almost ripping it apart in her haste to count her coins. There was a drawing of a stag beneath the mouth watering dessert, but she could find no silvers in her purse, only coppers.

She sighed sadly.

Then someone walked up with a silver in hand.

"Here," he offered...and she turned to see Jon, standing in black and red. She stared at him in shock. He found me? How? He looked at her curiously, looking past her messy hair and dirty clothes and at her face, so she quickly reached out for the coin, knowing that to try and flee now would simply give her away even quicker. I'll be going back to the castle soon, but I don't want to go back just yet!

She deepened her voice and said quietly, "Thank you."

Then she spun on her heels and started towards the shop, trying to keep calm.

"Arya?" asked her brother...and she sighed quietly as she froze at the sound of her own name.

"My name's Arry! Arry the peasant boy!" she snapped in her deeper voice.

Jon laughed at the sound of it...and even she could barely choke back one of her own. "And what will Ned think if he finds out you've ran off again, "Arry"?"

She sighed again, defeated. No point trying to hide it anymore. She pleaded with her half-brother, "Don't tell father, please?"

He mussed her messy hair playfully as he smiled and said, "Why would I tell father, you've been by me the entire time."
She smiled at him...and turned her attention to the strange colors he was wearing. Normally, Jon had worn the same colors Robb and Bran did, even if her mother hated the idea of it, but here he was, standing in front of her in black on red. Everyone knew that he was going to be landed and that he had to get his own colors, words, sigil and even a name for his branch of the family, just like Bran would have to do if he couldn't get a place in the Kingsguard, just like she wished to have when she was older. But if he has his own colors, does that mean father's gave him land?

"Have you finally chosen your colors?"

"I think so," he answered with a smile, much kinder and more friendly than the ones Theon ever gave. "There isn't another house in the North with them."

"Does...that mean you're getting your land? You're leaving?"

He's my brother...I don't want him to go. Not yet.

He laughed. "Not yet. Not for a couple of years, anyway. Come on, we best get back to the castle before your mother gets too worried."

She passed him back his coin and sighed again. She hoped to have maybe another hour or so outside before having to go back to the castle, a chance to explore her home some more, but now she would be coming back early enough that she might have to deal with lessons under septa Mordane again, being forced to learn how to sew, how to dance and how to be ladylike...lessons that were as long and boring as they were pointless. She stayed silent for the entire walk back to the castle, but she never thought of trying to run off and go back into the city. Her brother had found her and the people around them had realized who she was because of it, but it was also the honorable thing to do and wouldn’t embarrass either of them. Besides, I'll be outside again tomorrow after we break our fasts. Guards sighed at themselves as they passed, knowing how Jory and Rodrick would drill them that little bit harder as they worked to come up with a plan that would stop her from leaving the castle quite as easily. Her constant adventures into the city had been helping them find weaknesses in the defenses, gaps in patrols, nooks and crannies that were never checked, passages that were thought to be secure and places where the field of view from the towers were just not quite wide enough to see her.

Even during the days where she wasn't able to leave the castle, she worked on her plans that allowed her to. She looked at the towers and remembered which guards were where, listening in on their conversations when she could to know how focused they would be, whether they had been drinking the night before. She had never done anything that might've hurt someone, but she always worked hard to find a way out of the castle, so when she had the chance it was all the easier to get out.

As her brother took her through the gatehouse, she smiled widely as she heard the Mormont woman shout out to her. "Your mother has been looking everywhere for you!"

The she-bear stood tall and proud, as proud as any man, and she smiled at Arya as she spoke with her brother. There was no one in the world Arya wanted to be more like than her. She wanted to hunt and ride and fight, just as she could. So sometimes she secretly practiced with her, learning how to shoot a bow for hunting and a crossbow for war, how to fight with sword, mace and shield, even learning how to ride a horse on the rarest of days. I want to be just like her. She wore the same clothes and cut her hair the same way and was never far from her if she could help it.

Dacey smiled at her brother, a teasing smile as he looked over him from head to heel, glancing at the black direwolf on red. "...Is this the sixth Blackfyre Rebellion?"
Jon froze. Then he looked down at his clothes. Then with a blank face, he started walking towards the keep as Dacey began to laugh.

"Come on, Arya, you need to change out of those. And have a bath, gods, girl, you smell like dust," Dacey reached out and wiped her hand across Arya's leather tunic, pulling away a hand covered in dust and grime. "Where did you go to get this much on you?"

I won't say, not even to her!

"Exploring."

Dacey laughed as they started walking towards the keep themselves. "Exploring, you say? You won't ever tell me how you left the castle, will you?"

"I won't," she answered firmly. "Ever."

"Even from me? Don't worry, we've all got our own secrets. Only fair you have yours, too."

The castle was busy as they began to hold court, but she wasn't there to watch, as Dacey led her through the back halls where she wouldn't be seen on her way back to her chambers.

"Where did you go, anyway? The market?" the she-bear asked as they started to go up the steps.

"I went around most of the city, and spoke with a Green Man. He said the branches of fate were broken...do you know what he meant?"

Dacey shrugged. She was only six years or so older than Jon and a year older than Theon, strong and beautiful, too. "The Green Men say a lot of things, but only some of it makes sense. If it's important, I think we'll figure it out before long, and if it's truly important, they would have told Ned."

"...I guess you're right."

She always listened to everything Dacey said, and it made sense. If it had been important, wouldn't the Green Man have told her father and not her? It's not like I can do anything about it, even if it was...but I'll tell him when I see him.

She yawned as she climbed up the steps, then she asked, "Are you going to be taking me to the septa?"

"After you've been cleaned up? No...and I think we'll be going hunting tomorrow, with Robb and all the others."

Arya grinned. She loved hunting, especially with her brothers riding alongside her. When they got to her room, Dacey found her some new, clean clothes, then the two headed to one of the baths inside the castle keep, one exclusively for the women of the household, even if her mother thought it was a bad idea...since it certainly didn't fit to the southron ideal of bathing, and the Faith had tried to wipe out their method since they thought it made people wanton and ill. They're wrong. It makes us as hard as rocks!

Dacey opened the door to the first room, and Arya followed her in. It was a small room, with four
square baths filled with icy cold water and with bins to hold piles of dirty clothes for the serving maids to collect later in the day, then another set of bins that held clean clothes for after bathing...and a door, on the opposite side that led to the bathhouse proper. She set the clothes Dacey chose for her down away from the cold waters, then started taking off her leathers and setting them aside before sliding herself into the icy cold water as naked as the day she had been born. The cold water chilled her to the bone, but she bit down on nothing and didn't make a sound as she slipped beneath it all, submerging her entire body beneath the surface before pushing herself out, just as Dacey did in the tub just past hers, who shook her long black hair and threw it over her shoulder. She looked to see if Arya was shivering and smiled when she saw she wasn't.

Then they both walked to the door, the big, strong door on the far side that could barely hold in the great heat of the room on the other side. Steam drifted out through the gap beneath the door, filling her with a renewed energy as it rushed past her skin, as relaxing as a warm rain. But it was only the start, as she opened the door and stepped into the hot room. It was made entirely out of wood, with copper pipes flowing through the walls all around and only a small hole in the wall to vent smoke from the pile of burning charcoal in the center, surrounded by stone blocks like an oven. Wooden benches sat all around it, the closest ones to the center being unbearably hot in her opinion, while the ones closest to the wall were colder and meant for children. I haven't flowered yet...but I'm not a child! I'm already big! Barrels of water sat around the room, alongside big wooden ladles for heaping it onto the coals to make steam.

She sat in the middle row of the fiery room, letting the heat swallow her whole as it flowed over her, making her weary muscles tingle at its soft caress. She yawned again in the relaxing warmth, and Dacey simply said, "If you're tired, go to sleep. I'll wake you when it's time to go."

She smiled at the woman who was her sister, her protective, strong sister, even if they weren't related by blood or marriage. She lay down, flat on her back...and let herself be carried into blissful rest.

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End of Part 4!

Chapter End Notes

Anyway, we see how Arya has been sneaking out of the castle, and she's definitely a clever girl, that's for sure. She's been going through the small gap between the interior wall that separates the rooms from the exterior wall, where the pipes flow. She's strong, too, from constantly climbing up and down those tunnels, grabbing onto the pipes and then descending, one at a time, through hot and cold. She looks up to Dacey Mormont, no question about it, and that's one of the reasons she is wilder in this universe than she is in canon. Catelyn is trying to rein her in, but the harder she tries the more Arya fights back.

Ned, on the otherhand, pretty much knows that he can never hope to control her, so is content to let her do what she wants within reason and so long as she stays safe. Arya has a lot of love for her father and her brothers, even Sansa too, but to say her relationship with Catelyn is strained is an understatement. She is going against everything Catelyn had been taught to expect of her daughters, and with neither Sansa or Arya being much like their mother, she's starting to feel like...
sunglasses...

...A fish out of water.

She feels rather isolated, and we'll see more about that in her part. Hence why she had hoped Arya would be more ladylike than her sister...which definitely didn't happen.

Moving on, we also see the first Seastark since their mention in the original post. They're from the east coast and protect the Narrow Sea alongside the Manderlys, just as the Darkstarks protect the Sunset Sea by helping the Mormonts. Keeping pirates at bay in the Narrow Sea is of major importance to the North, since the canal has redirected the flow of trade around the continent and made the North fairly dependent on open trade lanes with the Free Cities...so people like Salladhor Saan are on the North's hit list.

And of course, the bathhouse inside Winterfell is a sauna. Or more accurately, it's a banya, the Russian variant. The North is certainly well suited for developing a sauna culture of their own, even in canon, since they have an abundance of fuel for them and they would certainly be a nice thing to have in that climate. I wouldn't think it was much of a leap for them to develop something like it on their own, especially with long winters. In our world, steam baths mostly fell out of favor on the continent as the Church really did think they made people lustful - which they might well have done, considering many of them were mixed gender - but the North certainly doesn't have that problem.

And in reality, many women did give birth in the banya, because they had a lower chance of catching an infection in the process. Though they didn't know why, the soot and smoke are a natural disinfectant, making the room a nearly sterile environment. Hell, even the Russian nobility took this stuff into account when giving birth. From my research, a lot of people hit themselves on the back with birch branches and the like, to improve circulation...obviously not as hard as Torrhen hit his brother, though.

And we see a closer look at Winterfell itself. The castle walls have spells woven into them, just like at Storm's End, but whether or not they do anything is a mystery. The entire castle has been extensively fortified and expanded in some areas, mostly to ensure that the visiting lords and ladies - people like the Karstark brothers and their sister - have a room to stay that is fitting their status in the North. Places like the First Keep have been restored and expanded, while other rooms have been built to provide amenities, etc. The city is also well built...and of course, we have that shop with the glass front, which like CDA pointed out is a bit of an anomaly, since it loses heat through the glass.

Then we see the Snowcloaks, the city watch for Winterfell. They don't need as many men to patrol the same amount of space as a southron city, since the eagles in the sky might as well be UAVs from our own world. The warg inside can see everything going on below, so when he or she sees a crime going on, they can simply watch and report it to their superiors, watch the person move around and then take control of an animal like a bear to alert a guard squad and lead them to the lawbreaker. For a lack of better words, this means the city watch might as well be everywhere in the city at once.

Then Arya meets a Green Man. I think that part speaks for itself. The technique he used for the tree is real and an efficient way of growing new trees quickly. It's a pretty simple process, so I'd consider it safe that they'd know about it.
Catelyn watched her youngest child play with his wooden blocks, raising one on top of another as he built a tiny castle that she knew was meant to be Winterfell, even if it looked nothing like it. He had his wild moments, times where no one could keep him in check, not even his father, but that was normal for a boy his age, even one born south of the Neck. *I pray he settles soon...Arya had been just the same, but she never stopped.* She sighed. Her girls went against everything she had been taught was the right way for a lady to act, everything she had been taught herself. Sansa was beautiful, but strong willed; never afraid to tell people when they thought they were wrong or whenever they wanted her to do something she didn't want to do. Arya...she was her aunt made small, her husband told her, she was going to be one of the great beauties of the realm when she came of age, but was as wild as fire and utterly uncontrollable. Only an hour ago had Catelyn tried to get her youngest daughter to go to the septa, to learn more about the ways of being a lady, but she had vanished out of her chamber without a trace...even though there was a guard watching the door. It was as though she could walk through walls.

*We have so little in common. My girls...they're not like me, they never will be. My sons won't be knights, my daughters won't be ladies.*

Was it too much to expect for her children to have things in common with her? True, Robb, Sansa, Brandon and Rickon had her auburn hair and her blue eyes, but they were Northern to the core, without a drop of the south in the way they acted. Sansa had struck her bastard brother when he had embarrassed her before, and rather than apologizing they had both simply laughed it off as if it had never happened at all, and she was the child of hers who was closest to the south. None of her children were like her, none of them kept the Seven, none of them were interested in the South or the southerner way of doing things and try as she might to shape them so that they might have a few things in common with her and the south, none of them had changed. They all looked to their father and her beloved husband for guidance, even the girls. Had she done something wrong? All she had ever wanted was a peaceful family and she had created it...but she didn't feel like a part of it. How could she? *I'm alone. I'm surrounded by my family and my husband...but I am alone.*

A part of her craved the walls of home, her true home. Riverrun. It was so far away from her, so far from the North and its snow covered cities. She missed its rivers, its sandstone walls...and the friends and family she had there. Lysa, her sweet and innocent little sister, her stern but loving father, her understanding uncle, even cunning Petyr. But they were lost to her now, lost like tears in the rain. Lysa was married to Jon Arryn, Lord Paramount of the Vale, Brynden had followed her, Edmure was with her father in the Riverlands and Petyr had become Master of Coin. She missed them all dearly...and remembered the day she met the man who had become her husband. He wasn't as big or as handsome as his elder brother Brandon, but he had the purest heart she had ever seen in a man, kind and loving, never hard to her. She had known for years before then that she was to marry the heir to Winterfell; her father had arranged the betrothal for whatever reason - he had never told her why - so when the handsome heir to Winterfell, Brandon Stark, came to Riverrun curious of his betrothed, she met him with just as much curiosity in return.

*Every lord and lady learnt the sigils of all the great houses of the Seven Kingdoms, so the grey direwolf of the Starks was already familiar to her...but the cadet branches that had accompanied him,*
as curious as he of his bride-to-be and of the South, were less so. She knew them, yes, she had been taught by her maester and the septa to recognize them even when she was little, but to see the banners fluttering in the air and not in the pages of a book was a different thing altogether. The reality of it had sunk in, then, the realization of it all. Brandon had been sweet...but forceful, aggressive and strong, used to having his own way in life and in the bedchamber. She knew now she would have never found love had she married him, she would've gone utterly mad and she loved the man she had married. Hoster had heard tales of the cities of the North, winterscapes covered in snow that stretched as far as the eye could see and great lakes filled with fish in summer that froze as hard as iron in winter, blocks of ice rising from the surface and cracking at the top like shards of broken glass and where it snowed even in summer. Everyone in the South knew that the amount of gold dragons the North sent to the Iron Throne had been steadily increasing, and everyone knew about the canal, built only a few centuries before that had robbed the Dornish of their wealth and brought the lion, the rose and the wolf closer together. It was common knowledge that if the Lannisters, the Tyrells and the Starks worked together, they had enough men to overrun the rest of the Seven Kingdoms combined, with enough ships to challenge the Free Cities for control of the waves. They had been close friends before the war, with the canal bringing all three of them closer together...so much so that Tytos Lannister had wed his daughter Genna to Beron Darkstark.

But many in the South thought the canal had been built millenia ago by Brandon the Builder and that the Starks had simply stumbled upon it and got it working again. They thought that the cities of the North were decrepit, filled with wooden shacks with thatched roofs and musty timbers, that the North was and would never be a threat to southron supremacy. How could it be, if they only sent forth a few thousand men during the Dance of Dragons or the Blackfyre Rebellion? Her father had heard both sides, and listened to merchants who had sailed to the northern cities of White Harbor and Darkport and told him that the cities were as they said: once one went past the swamps of the Neck, where the crannogmen harvested tar for shipbuilding, pitch for burning and salt for cooking...one entered another world, where only a handful worshipped the Seven, a land where there were no knights but where the castles reached high into the sky, where space was no obstacle to building wide and tall. He told her how the people of the North bathed everyday they could inside their hotbaths, after drilling in the courtyards or after sewing in their ballrooms sometimes the men and women of the North would even bathe together, lashing themselves on the back with sticks and branches for relaxation.

Skenchangers practiced their arts openly, not by turning into animals but by taking control of them, slipping inside their skins the way she might change dresses. They had armies as finely trained and equipped as any in the south, even if they had different ideas of how they were meant to fight in battle. Then he told her of Winterfell, the place she would spend the rest of her days once she was wed. The castle had seemed so much bigger when he told her of it, of the runes woven into the walls, of the pipes that flowed inside the bricks and the scores of servants who worked there to provide for the dozens of highborn men and women who lived there alongside the Starks. They were wards from the great houses of the North, sent to Winterfell to grow alongside the children of the Stark family and to earn the friendship of the ancient house, then to speak on the behalf of their families whenever the Lord of Winterfell held court. They were even there to be with those who they might one day marry, a place where the lords and ladies of the North could speak with one another on casual terms and learn more about one another, making marriages in the North easy...though many of the women certainly tried to win the hand of the Stark heir, just as many of the men were certainly interested in Lyanna.
Then he told her about the cadet branches. Half of them were from bastards, like the Snowstarks, who were descended from the bastard son that the King in the North had begotten on a wildling woman. A few traced their lines back to warrior women, and others still came from second sons. The idea of landing so many bastards unnerved her, especially when she learnt of how the Greystarks once tried to usurp their cousins in Winterfell only to be beaten into submission, stripped of their original seat and landed east of where they once were. Had the Starks not learnt that landing bastards was a dangerous thing? Didn't they learn anything from the Blackfyre Rebellion? To favor a bastard enough to give them land was to make the realm bleed, as had happened a dozen times before. And yet, as Brynden told her, Brandon was surrounded by those people who should have been plotting to take his inheritance from him...but they were like brothers, so much so that half of them followed him to the grave after going to King's Landing at his side.

Then I married Ned...and I did my duty. I gave him a son...and he returned to me with a son of his own...

She didn't care that he had been unfaithful to her in the Rebellion, every wife knew that sometimes their husbands might need the comfort that only a woman could provide on the eve of battle, she didn't care that he had sired a child on her...but she was horrified that he had brought that child into her home, to grow alongside their trueborn children as a brother, then promising to give that bastard son land when he came of age, a noble title and even offering to arrange a good marriage for him. She could forgive him for anything else, easily, but she could never forgive him for that, never, not in a thousand years, so she stayed away from the bastard, trying to avoid the feeling that rose in the back of her throat whenever she saw him. Every fiber of her being told her that he had committed a horrible mistake bringing him under the roof of Winterfell. Would he not come to envy his brother, to dream of having Winterfell for his own, just as the Greystarks had all those years ago? What if he was to ally with an enemy outside the North for the chance to take his brother's right? What if?

Had he been born a girl...I would have never minded. I would've been a mother to her and loved her, but as a boy...he's a threat to my children.

But...nowadays, it seemed the only thing her husband's bastard was interested in stealing from her son was his dessert, not his inheritance. She had tried to separate the two, but it simply couldn't be done, like trying to undo a mixing of water and dye. She had tried all the same, but all it had done was distance her even further from the children she tried to protect. Being a mother had sounded so simple in her septa's lessons all those years ago, but it had become so much more complex than she had ever expected. The old, wisened septa told her that her children could be controlled, and that she should try and steer them towards what she wanted them to do...but it had never worked. She prayed to the Crone to light her way, to teach her some way of making her children the way they were meant to be, to show them how they're meant to act in the world...but again, it had never worked.

She was at a loss on how to deal with them, now. When she had Sansa she had hoped that she would have been someone like her, someone Catelyn could talk to and be more than just mother and daughter, but friends, too...but it hadn't been. She had hoped the same for Arya, too, praying to the Mother and the Maiden that she would be more of a lady than her sister, but the gods seemed to have a sense of irony and they made her even less of a lady than her sister. Bran had dreamed of being a knight, he even kept the Seven so that he could pray to the Warrior as the Kingsguard did, and she only encouraged him and loved him for it...and then he learnt that he could warg into animals...and though he never lost the dream of becoming a member of the Kingsguard, they started to drift apart after he stopped worshipping the Seven since he knew what they thought of people who had that ability.
She sighed again. Rickon climbed over his little walls and picked up a small wooden pyramid and placed it on top of the keep, standing on his tip toes to get it onto the tall building. He grinned widely and pointed at his wooden castle with excitement.

"Mama! Look!" he spoke cheerfully, lifting her sad and weary heart.

She smiled at her youngest as she said, "It's wonderful."

"When I grow up, I want to be a builder!"

He said he wanted to be a direwolf last week...awww...

She loved her children dearly, all of them, but it saddened her that she had so little in common with them. Rickon was still very young and though she had only weaned him a little after his second birthday - as was proper - he was still a baby, even if he had his wild moments. She hoisted him up into her arms, into a hug she so rarely got. "You'll be just like Brandon the Builder and you will raise big castles."

He grinned as he planted his face against her shoulder. "Can we see dada?" she heard as little more than a murmer.

She smiled again. He nestled close against her as she started walking towards the door. "We'll see, we can't interrupt him if he's in court."

Rickon nodded sleepily, so she took a little walk around the room in a circle...and then he was fast asleep. *If he was more awake, I would've taken him.* She walked over to his bed - a much smaller one than a full one, but bigger than the cradle he used to sleep in - and pulled back the covers before gently placing him on it and rolling the blanket back up to keep him warm. Finally, she gave him a kiss on the cheek before leaving him to rest. She was closer to her children than many mothers normally were, but that only made her all the more sadder when they finally grew apart. She wanted to be closer to them, she really did, but she didn't know how. Nothing she had been taught in the south worked on them...

So maybe I need to try a different way...

She started piecing together an idea as she left Rickon to sleep and headed towards her own chambers. She and Ned shared a bed every night, even if they weren't being intimate with one another, but she had her own room all the same, directly beside his with a doorway connecting them together. It was a warm place, one that she had decorated like her old one at Riverrun, even though she knew she would never return to her original chamber, her original home. Ned had built a sept for her inside the courtyard, but going there by herself, without any of her family around her...she couldn't bare to do it. That was something only a woman who had outlived the rest of her family should do, as even maidens went with their mothers and sisters. When Sansa gave her a gift for the Mother's Day, she had been utterly stunned that she knew, and she took it gladly...only to weep in her chamber afterwards. Her children were so close, so close to her in Winterfell...but so far away.

She climbed up through the steps to the floor her chamber was on in silence, thinking. The harder she tried to steer her children, the harder they fought back and the more distant they became...so, what if she tried the opposite? What if she stopped trying to control them entirely, but instead tried to encourage them to do what they loved the most? Or was that being too reckless? *Arya sneaks into the city whenever she can, even without guards. If she was to do that in a southern city, like King's Landing...gods, it doesn't bare thinking about.* She sighed again as she stepped into her room. It was well decorated and her husband had certainly spared no expense on making her feel welcome in Winterfell...and for that, she was truly grateful. She was truly a fish out of water here, so far from
what she knew to be the norm and was raised in. Nothing she had been taught in the south could have ever prepared her for life in the North, not even what Brynden told her so many years ago. She sat down in her favorite chair to think...and then there was a sudden knock at the door.

"Come in," she said loud enough to be heard through the door.

After a moment's pause, the young lady Lyanne Darkstark stepped inside, one of the few girls in Winterfell who wanted her advice. She was a shy thing, the spitting image of her wanton sister aside from the orange ribbon she wore in her hair, gentle and innocent. *If Arya is her aunt made small, then Lyanne is my sister.* She smiled fondly at the young maiden, a girl who reminded her so much of her little sister and was one of the few people she could call a friend in Winterfell. "Lady Stark...can we talk?" she asked carefully.

"Of course," she gestured to a chair besides her with a smile. "What do you want to talk about?"

"I'm worried...it's about my sister." Lyanne sighed as she walked across the room and sat in the chair. "And..." she blushed a bright shade of red. "Boys."

Catelyn almost laughed. Lysa had said almost the exact same thing years ago, looking to Catelyn for advice when she still wasn't sure herself. "There's no reason to be afraid of them, Lyanne."

"It's not that. People are getting me and my sister confused. She likes to take men to her bed often, and I don't...but people get us mixed up because we look the same."

Catelyn never lost her smile as Lyanne spoke. She was like a daughter to her, a daughter she knew and could understand, so she was always happy to have her around. Indeed, she had started following Catelyn to the sept, something that made it a little easier for her to go there at all.

"I'm worried someone she might bed might think I am her and do something...untowards. I'm worried she might never find a husband, too, since she's already been taken...and how do I know if I like someone?"

*She's at the age...* 

"Lyanne," Catelyn said, watching Lyanne look straight towards her and relax a little at the sound of her voice. "You look like your sister, but you don't have to wear the same as her. Try wearing something different, it will make you stand apart from her."

Lyanne sighed. "We don't have different clothes. We both have the same colors, and we're the same size and have the same styling."

*They both wear Northern fashions, but if Lyanne was to wear clothes the way they do in the South, no one would ever mistake them again.*

"I have a few ideas, but I will need to speak with a dressmaker first."

Lyanne nodded. "I hope they help...Theon thought I was my sister and..." she went quiet, obviously uncomfortable talking about it...and simply seeing her like that made Catelyn hate the squid even more than she already did.

*He is nothing but trouble.*
It had taken her years to settle into Winterfell, even if it wasn't as familiar to her as Riverrun. She had latched onto her husband and let him tell her all about the North, all about the lords and ladies and the culture and the things they did together, then she had started working out the wards, whether they be men or women. They might argue amongst themselves, or even fight one another, but the Greyjoy...they hated him more than anything. She had seen a "friendly" brawl between Donnel Snowstark and the Smalljon over who was stronger break up the moment Theon came into view and like bricks in a wall, her son and his friends put aside any differences they had to focus on him alone. Oh, they had started off friendly enough when the Greyjoy boy had been brought to Winterfell after his father's fruitless rebellion, Robb had been eager to get another friend...but then the boy offended the bastard...and turned all the Wolves of Winterfell against him. Things had only gotten worse for him since then, so nowadays he spent most of his time drinking and whoring in the city, then returning to the castle so deep in his cups he had once collapsed beneath the gatehouse. It had made him few friends and countless enemies, so much so that she was sure if he hadn't been under her husband's protection as his ward he would've died long ago, maybe while trying to "fight" against the city watch, or ran through by one of the guards whose wife he had slept with.

He had never even tried to make amends since then, whether because of his own stubborn nature or because of his damned pride, but even then she doubted that Robb or Jon would've ever accepted it...and now he had done something wrong to Lyanne, a girl she loved as much as either of her daughters.

"What did he do?" she asked. *If he tried to force himself on her not even the Seven would be able to save him.*

Lyanne sighed as she gathered the strength to say as quickly as she could, "He grabbed my rump."

"If he does anything again, tell my husband."

The shy girl nodded in understanding. She wouldn't be young forever, Catelyn knew, and eventually she would have to marry, to face her worst fear, but she saw no reason to make her put up with it before then, before she was ready. To put the young lady at ease, she changed the topic away from men entirely and asked, "What can you tell me about my daughter, Sansa?"

*They're friends, so maybe I can learn something.*

"Sansa is a great friend. She's strong, never afraid to say what she thinks, but she tries to be friendly, and looks after everyone if she can...she's like...you."

Catelyn blinked in confusion. How was Sansa like her, when she seemed so...different? "Me? How?"

Lyanne smiled at Catelyn fondly. "You're both strong, kind, proud and you both try to protect everyone around you."

Her mind began to race. Were they really so alike? *Sansa slapped her bastard brother! That isn't very lady-*

An old memory came back to her, from a time before she had even flowered, when she and Lysa were playing kissing games with Petyr. He had been more direct with Lysa, who let him use his tongue, and when he tried the same with Catelyn she had slapped him so hard in her embarrassment that she had left a red print on his face…and then they laughed at it afterwards. The realization of it all, that Sansa was just like her except in Northern furs struck her as hard as she had struck him.
Seven hells...she's me.

Just as Catelyn would do anything to protect her children, was there nothing that Sansa would not do to protect her friends? Were either of them all that willing to change, unless they had no choice but to? Both of them could be stubborn at times and both of them always tried to be polite even if they didn't want to be.

She sighed. "Lyanne, would you excuse me for a moment?"

She nodded happily. "I'll be here till you get back."

Catelyn rose from her seat and walked out the room. There was only one person in the world who found a way to control her when she was a girl. She headed up the steps, to where Maester Luwin kept the rookery. They were exceptional with children, even if they had none of their own, and she had turned to them whenever she had problems at Riverrun, all her siblings had, even Petyr.

Uncle Brynden, you're my only hope. If there is anyone who can help me with my children, it's you.

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End of Part 5!

Chapter End Notes

So, where to start

Well, one of the reasons Catelyn is having so much trouble with Sansa...is because she's a northern version of Catelyn. Catelyn's stubbornness in trying to make Sansa more southron, more ladylike, is reflected in her own stubbornness in that she won't change, not even for her mother. They both look after friends and family first and foremost, and they are both strong women. They're so similar that she never realized it till Lyanne told her just how similar they are, though there are some differences that I'm sure you've noticed

And speaking of Catelyn, though she might not have realized it, there is certainly a bit of the North in her, even if she hasn't realized that it's there. But her biggest problem is her relationship with her children: she loves them, sure, but they're distant simply because she has so little shared interests with them. Rickon is in that sweet part where he's young enough that he still needs his mother, but when he grows up he won't need her anymore...and they'll start drifting apart since they have so little in common. Hence the part about being a fish out of water: she's alone in that she has little in common with them...even though she actually has alot in common with Sansa but she has never actually realized it before. One of the things that have kinda stopped her from adapting as much as she could have is how she has latched onto things that are more familiar to her, like decorating her room to be more like the one she had at Riverrun, and then loving Lyanne like a daughter...simply because she's like a much younger Lysa.

God, that's nightmarishly hard to explain
So, she's bringing in a person who is extremely good with children...the Blackfish Of course, that's stuff for another time and another part We'll see a lot more about her feelings towards Jon and the bastard branches of the Stark line then, but that's a while away yet.

Moving on, the canal has been a large driving force behind Northern power, but it has also affected relations with the other parts of the Seven Kingdoms. The Lannisters and the Tyrells benefit greatly, and so they had pretty good relations till Robert's Rebellion...where things promptly went bad after Tywin sacked King's Landing. In this timeline, instead of Genna being married to a Frey, she was married to a Darkstark, since there are certainly a lot of benefits involved in getting good relations with one of the naval powers in your neighborhood. She's the mother of Adara and Lyanne...and if I knew what software CDA used for his family trees, I'd hammer out one for each of the cadet branches.

And not every part of the North has benefited from highland cattle, but they might have benefited indirectly. The Neck, for instance, is still swampland, but they are thus the North's chief supplier of tar, which is essential for ship construction.

Oh, and Catelyn is still suspicious of Jon, even if she's starting to realize he isn't planning on doing any kinslaying anytime soon.

Next part: Bran! And no swapping this time
Bran I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Bran peered down from his eagle, watching the people go about their lives as he soared above the city, knowing his own body was being carefully watched and protected inside the room just above the guard quarters. He felt the cold winds blowing past his wings, the rising warmth coming from the chimneys of the houses below and heard the sounds of the people, too. He could see for miles around, flying above even the highest towers of Winterfell with a view that was known only by skinchangers and once, the dragonlords of the old Freehold. He looked down upon the twists and turns of the streets, watching people go about their daily lives as they always did, whether he was up there watching or not. He wasn't the only warg in the skies, there were a few dozen, leaving no part of the city streets uncovered, ensuring that every crime that took place on the city streets, every theft, every drunken brawl and every pick-pocketing was seen and dealt with. Like people speaking through water, he heard some of the other wargs leave their birds and go down the steps to where idle squads of guardsmen gathered, telling them what had happened and where, then taking control of another animal to lead them and point people out. But he soared higher than any of them, uninterested in watching single people, but the city as a whole. When a warg broke an animal, any of them could take it, so there was never a moment that the city wasn't being watched, as the eagles that the city watch used were owned by the watch, not by any one man or woman. But his bird, Goldwing...it was his, well and truly. He was a strong golden eagle, from the Vale, with a wingspan of seven feet, a giant even amongst his own kind, with talons like daggers and a beak that could crush the skull of a raven with ease. Male golden eagles were usually smaller than the females, but that only made Goldwing all the more unique amongst the eagles of the Snowcloaks and the wild ones that hunted the mice and rats of the snowy city. The Kingsguard have never had a warg before! I'll be the first! He felt the little niggling of the bird in his mind, desiring to take back control, if only for a little while, so that he could find something to eat, so he let it takeover again, looking through its eyes as it tipped it's wings high and dove towards the ground.

There was little difference between his own wants and the bird's, now. He could feel it's hunger, just as it could feel his, and once he had been heading to the kitchens of Winterfell in search of something to eat when the bird swooped towards him with a roll of white bread in his claws, still warm from wherever it had snatched it. Goldwing knows I should only have cooked food, he never brings me anything raw...the only problem is when I think of clothes and he rips them apart when he tries to get them for me. His mother had been horrified when she had learnt that he was a warg - not as scared as the septon had been - but slowly she had come to learn that not all skinchangers were bad; most of them were just common folk who had been born with the power to assert their will over animals. They were just another part of life in the North, now, working for lords as trackers and scouts, for the Night's Watch as rangers, or as watchmen. Even the Seastarks have people like me on their ships, that way they can find out where they are at sea.

He felt and heard the wind screaming past him as Goldwing shot towards the city, faceless crowds of people and featureless buildings growing more detailed as he got closer and closer, throwing his wings outwards and darting not even a dozen feet above the rooftops, looking around constantly in search of prey. He had taught the bird well, not just by flying in his body, but by hunting with him, too, taking him into the woods and fields of the North to hunt rabbits, foxes and deer. Even wolves
could fall before it, but he tried to avoid those when he could, it wasn’t right to hunt what was kin to the direwolf, at least in his opinion. He flew in his bird often, but merely spending time with it was still great fun, especially with how close they were. He had learnt how to let the bird take control, but how to stay with it so that he could see through its eyes, but also how to take full control when he wanted.

Goldwing glanced left and saw a small child covered in dirt running as fast as they could from a feral dog’s jaws in the backstreets of the city. He had managed to teach Goldwing something that no falconer would have ever been able to teach, whether they came from south of the Neck or north of it.

How to tell the difference between right and wrong.

When a warg was in the skin of an animal they influenced it, causing them to take on their traits and pick up their habits, even if they were being influenced ever-so-slightly in return. His eagle had learnt from him and his way of thinking and it had only changed Goldwing for the better, even seeming to give the bird a sense of honor, even if it was a simple one. It never went near the eggs of other birds, even if they were prey, leaving their nests as safe areas and even ignoring their mothers and fathers as they brought meals back to their hatchlings. He had even watched it protect the nest of a snow shrike from another golden eagle that had thought to make a meal out of the young birds inside, too young to fly on their own and utterly defenseless. Goldwing had easily driven off the smaller eagle, then watched the nest from afar to ensure it didn't come back till the fully grown shrikes returned.

The bird knew his dream of being a true knight, like Ser Barristan the Bold, Ser Gerold the White Bull and Ser Arthur Dayne, a dream that his mother had encouraged with all her heart...the eagle had learnt it all. He acts like a hero would, now.

Goldwing veered about in a swift, fluid motion and darted towards the dog in deathly silence as the child screamed and cried.

The mongrel’s eyes went wide in sudden realization, but it was far too late...Goldwing rammed beak first, directly into the dog’s head and right between the eyes, like the strike of a knight's lance hitting true. There was a loud and pained yelp as blood began to pour from the wound, but Goldwing shot back into the sky and dove down again, sinking a talon into the soft flesh on the back to anchor itself before using the other to rake along the side, cutting deep, through the fur and skin and into the muscle and scratching the bone deep inside. Then it ripped along the side, like tearing cloth, from the dog’s left hind leg all the way to the throat in a single smooth and brutal cleave, nicking an artery - or several - that only added to the pour of blood that killed the feral dog long before it ever had a chance to fight back. It crashed to the ground as Goldwing continued the onslaught, going for the eyes with his beak and tearing them out one after the other with a wet squelch.

Bran felt them pop in his mouth, like crushing a hot boiled egg beneath his teeth. The golden eagle began to feast, the rich-metallic smell and taste of hot, steaming blood hitting him hard and quick, with a definition that his human senses would have never caught, a taste that made his human body sick.

Enough...

He let go of Goldwing's body...and was in his own once again, nestled safe and sound inside the guard quarters, where the Captain of the Wargs, Donnel Fourwings, waited with an hourglass tipped upside down, the sand halfway to the bottom. He was the son of a smith and his mother had been a milkmaid and he couldn’t read or write, but he was one of the most powerful wargs south of the Wall
and had four birds at his command, though none of them were as great as Bran's eagle. *I heard Theon call him Donnel Fourskins, but mother says I shouldn't ever call him that.* Donnel commanded the wargs that were part of the Snowcloaks, whether they were men or women, watching over them with his hourglass to make sure that they took a break every once in a while, to tend to the needs of their human bodies and to stop them from being in their other skins for too long; even the greatest warg could lose sight of their humanity if they stayed inside the skin of an animal for too long...which was one of the main reasons why his mother was afraid of him wearing the wings of his eagle. He was the most experienced warg in the watch, having joined over thirty years ago at the same age as Bran, but since then he had only grown more experienced in controlling his creatures, more proficient at slipping in and out quickly and better at dominating them whenever he had to.

*Jon says he's in all his birds at once, but...I don't know.*

It was rare for a practicing warg like him to die of old age - most of them either went mad when they lost an animal, or became so inseparable from their skins that they might as well have been mad, as there was so much of the beast in them that they became not quite human. *That's why he has the hourglass. He stops people when it runs out, so they aren't out of their bodies too long.* All around him were other wargs, sat on the floor or on wooden benches, men and women dressed in blue and white, looking towards the floor with eyes as pale as milk. A fire crackled in the hearth on the far side besides the thick door of solid oak, reinforced with steel braces to keep the Snowcloak's most valuable weapons safe. There were wargs in all parts of the North, from the Neck to the Wall, and some even went across the Narrow Sea in search of employment as trackers for hire, or *assassins* in some cases if the rumors were true. Most of them stayed in the North, as the Faith despised them and the Andals were suspicious, so few of them ever thought to go South and even fewer actually did, but there was no such issue about visiting the Free Cities and signing up with the mercenary companies, who paid well for the talents that only a warg could bring to war. Even the Golden Company had a group, so few that they could be counted on one hand, people thirsty for wealth, fame and adventure, but they were far more dangerous than their small number might indicate, as they controlled elephant bulls, clad in steel plate heavier than anything a knight might carry and given the mind of a man that made them cunning and able to tell friend from foe.

The power of such a war animal was second only to the dragons...and dragons were gone from the world. The Golden Company had only a dozen of them and even less wargs to control them with, but without the weight of a litter on the back they were *deadly*, the pride of the Golden Company's battle line.

He rose from his position of the floor, wincing openly as the taste of blood faded from his mouth. Donnel spoke quietly to avoid distracting the wargs, but smiled, *"Your eagle having a "hot" supper?"*

Brandon nodded slowly and replied as quietly as Donnel. *"A dog."

*"You get used to the taste after a while, but you'll never like it."* Donnel glanced at the hourglass, careful not to knock it and the sands flowing inside. *"Still got half an hour left if you get a drink and wash it out."

*"No..."* he answered, half tempted to lick his sleeves to drive the taste from his mouth. *"I think I'm done for the day."

Donnel nodded. *"You'll be a powerful warg one day, if you keep practicing like you are..."* he sighed and warned, *"Just don't spend too long in the bird. You'll lose your wits if you do."*
He nodded obediently and without even a thought of complaint...everyone knew what happened to those who spent too long in their skins, the wargs who walked the world with their eyes forever turned skyward and a lust for wings of their own. There were rules for wargs like him, intended to protect them and those around from any harm that might result from being in the skin of an animal, but there were laws, too, for crimes that had been utterly unimaginable barely a century or two ago...and were still unknown south of the Neck. Every animal that has been taken has to be marked, whether by something as simple as drawing a pattern onto their fur or hide with a piece of charcoal, to the tiny rings of polished steel he had around the legs of Goldwing, just above the talons and easily visible. They gleamed in the light and had the direwolf of his house stamped onto them, showing that the bird was his. Most of the wargs in the city worked for the Snowcloaks, or for his father - there were never a lack of well paying jobs for even a weak warg - so there was never a risk of having his bird stolen from him, but the Snowcloaks usually claimed some of the stray animals in the city for their own use. The rings mean they can tell at a glance that he’s mine.

One of the most important rules for a warg is that they cannot be in the skin of their creature while it was enjoying the company of another animal, at least, that's what his mother and Donnel said. He wasn't so sure about that one, though. What was wrong about being in Goldwing while it was playing games with another eagle? I play games with Arya and Robb and all the others, there’s nothing wrong with that, and we even played fetch with Goldwing...but I'm not allowed to play games while in him? That is so unfair! Other than that, many of their rules were commonsense, like not eating the flesh of man while in their other skins; though why anyone would want to do such a thing was well beyond confusing.

He walked towards the door as quietly as he could to avoid breaking the concentration of those around him, then opened it as little as he could before slipping past it and into the hall. The main quarters of the Snowcloaks, sometimes called the Snowkeep, was a simple building of two floors, the first from stone blocks and the second was made from wood, since it had been added later as the city expanded. He was on the second floor, and in front of him was a balcony that gave a good view of the entryway, with the only stairs up and down being through the stairwell on the left, which rose to a lookout tower above. Past that was the armory, packed to the brim with weapons and armor, some of it being handed down from the men-at-arms but most of it being made specifically for the Snowcloaks. Then on the other side, there was the door that led to the chambers of the experienced guard sergeants and other officers, those few in the watch who had the authority to pass sentencing on behalf of his father. Between him and that door were a few more, the offices of the Captain of the Wargs and the Captain of the City Watch, the Quartermaster and a few more. Everywhere he looked there were people going about their day and keeping the watch running as smoothly as the gears of a watermill. He walked left to the stairs, looking around for familiar faces as he did. Their weapons and armor aren't as good as the guardsmen of Winterfell, and they're not as well trained, but they're just as brave!

He smiled at them all fondly as he went down the steps. A lot of the faces were familiar to him, as many in the Snowcloaks had kin working as guardsmen in the castle, with some even having brothers or sons in his father's household guard. He was careful to avoid slipping on the steps, but that didn't stop him from running down them, past a few laughing guards and to the bottom and onto the ground floor. His feet echoed as he leapt off the bottom step and onto the stone floor, but he already knew there was another floor underneath the Snowkeep, where the prisoners were held till they went to the Wall, or until they were sentenced to whatever fate they had brought upon themselves. The offer of taking the black was always given and always available for any who broke the laws of the North, with some even choosing to join the black brothers as they were pushed onto the chopping block, but many chose to go to the Wall. They don't want to become a burden on their family, so they take the black instead.
Thousands of years ago, when the North wasn't whole and nowhere near as powerful as it is today, during the worst winters imaginable it wasn't uncommon for the greybeards, the crippled and the weak to go "hunting" for their families, walking out into the snowstorms to die, so that there was more food for those who stayed behind. The need for such a sacrifice had died with the passage of time, but even now no one was willing to weigh down their family when the white winds blow and the day grows short. Even people crippled in accidents tried to find something that they could do to help, a way to earn their keep, so when healthy men broke the law, it was only natural that most of them would take the black. I would rather die than be crippled...I would never join the Kingsguard, or do anything I want to do. He had been warned by a Green Man before about climbing the towers of Winterfell, how he would be crippled if he so much as lost his grip upon the stones, but that was only one more reason why he chose not to climb them, ever. Why do I need to climb them, when I can fly over them? But, like every Northman, he took the words of the Green Men to heart, promising to never climb the towers of Winterfell ever again, or any towers for that matter if he could avoid it. How many towers will I have to climb as a whitecloak, anyway?

Stepping into the lobby, the downstairs was much the same as the upstairs, with the doors in more or less the same places, but it was better lit, with wider doors and all of them were more sturdily built than the ones upstairs. It was busier, too, and the door to the outside threw open as a group of guardsmen stepped inside, trailed by a brown bear, holding a thief who simply didn't have the strength to even begin to struggle against the animal holding him.

"I swear, I don't know how the ring got in my pocket!" yelled the man in the bear's grasp.

"Tell it to someone who cares. We watched you do it." answered a guard sergeant with disinterest. "The black or a hand?"

The thieving man sighed, his guilt truly obvious now. "The black," he muttered weakly. "I'll take the black."

The bear dropped him onto the floor with a soft thump. Then, it patted him on the back twice before dropping onto all fours and walking outside again. Brandon followed the bear out, into the cold day...where Goldwing was already waiting, perched upon the roof of a nearby building. He smiled at his eagle; he hadn't even finished growing, but he was already so powerful. Patches of white still dotted him, especially along his tail feathers, but his wings were brown and a very pale gold at the edges. His talons and beak dripped a steaming red, but Goldwing had already cleaned his body as best as he could, knowing that a knight should be as cleanly as possible. I don't keep the Seven anymore. They don't like people like me. But I don't have to keep their gods to be a knight...Ser Jorah keeps the Old Gods, like we do, and he's a knight, and there are others, too. Not many...but I don't think I have to be a knight to be in the Kingsguard.

He raised his sword hand for the bird and as it dove towards him, he thought of the last time he went to the sept. It wasn't a small one or poorly built - it had statues of the Seven made from chiseled granite - but so few people went there that he was sure his mother, his sister and he were the only ones who went, even though there was room for a hundred inside the walls. It had beautiful panes of stained glass brought from Myr and Braavos across the Narrow Sea, holy texts written in Oldtown by the brothers of the Starry Sept and had a septon who had no lack of piety or fervor...but had a lack of anyone interested in his preaching. There had once been a group of people - a dozen or so at most - who had been curious about the Seven, going there whenever the bells tolled, but it had been whittled away, with fewer people showing up to the septon's sermons year after year. Now, the only company the septon had were the septas, bottles of drink and the Seven...but Bran was sure that he lost his faith long ago. We don't like their gods and they don't like us very much. The septon said my
skinchaging was sorcery, so I stopped going.

The septon had once even tried to say that so many of the Stark heroes Old Nan had told him about, seen in the crypts and in the streets had been blessed by the Seven, but that was utter nonsense. Half of them had never even heard of the Seven, yet alone worshiped them. *Brandon the Builder was around before there were Andals, so how could he have been favored by the Smith?* The roots of the old gods ran as deep as those of their heart trees and he knew that no septon would ever be able to uproot them in the North. The Manderlys were the only house in the North, great or small, to worship the Seven, and Wylla kept the old gods, not the new...even if it was only to fit in with the ladies around her. The Green Men might have been a common sight in the North, but they visited all the Seven Kingdoms, tending to the wierwoods as far away as the mountains of Dorne near Starfall, while others had gone into the depths of the Vale, ignoring the warnings the knights gave that they would never come out again, only to meet the mountain clans, tend to their wierwoods and then leave, unharmed and unfazed.

...I wonder if there are any clansmen called Bran, too? I think they call my father "the Stark."

Goldwing landed on his wrist, gripping tightly...but he knew when he was holding too tight or that he was starting to cut into his skin, so it always loosened up whenever he winced or when his arm started to hurt. *Gods...he's as big as Rickon.* He ran his other hand across the bird's soft feathers, the bird looking at him in utter silence, but he knew it was happy.

There was a caw from besides him, a common raven that had taken Goldwing's perch upon the roof, looking down on him with eyes as black as night.

He turned and looked back at it as he raised his hand. He hated ravens and their loud caws, so unlike the proud majestic silence of a golden eagle, especially Goldwing, who seemed all the more noble for the fact he never made a sound. Goldwing already knew what he was thinking, already staring at the raven and loosening its grip upon his arm, not moving an inch.

Not till Bran threw his arm towards the raven and let Goldwing take flight.

*I hate ravens. The maesters should use bigger birds...there are so many eagles in the North now some are going wild...and they eat ravens.*

He looked up at the sky as the gigantic raptor bolted after the tiny raven. The sun was high in the sky, but his belly growled at him...like Goldwing, it was time to get something to eat. *Then, I get to practice with my lance!*

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End of Part 6!

Chapter End Notes

Now, where to start

Wargs are not just common in the North, they're well known in Northern society, so there are a lot of things that they can do and it's never hard for one of them to find any
work, either in the North or abroad, across the Narrow Sea, where they can definitely find employment. Some lords in the South might have a few, too, but they're going to be much rarer than in the North or across the Narrow Sea.

And of course...what could be better, than a warg inside a war elephant? Speaking of animals, golden eagles like Goldwing are huge birds - they really, really can get to seven feet of wingspan, and we know that there are eagles in Westeros, hell, Orell had one in canon...and he's north of the wall. They like cold environments, like Canada, Scandinavia and Russia, so there's definitely no reason why they can't live in the North, too. Naturally, the sheer strength of such a large bird of prey means that it is perfect for wargs, since there are no other animals in the sky that would hunt one...except maybe dragons.

They've even got the strength to deal with lone targets on their own...since it's well known that a lone golden eagle will attack wolves and hunt deer, too. They're the backbone of the Snowcloak's power, since not only can they see pretty much every crime as they're happening, they can rapidly respond to threats quick and efficiently. So if you're getting mugged in Winterfell, you really don't have to do anything to protect yourself, since a golden eagle could simply dive out of the sky and attack the mugger for you.

Or several eagles, for that matter.

So, simply put, Winterfell has a very, very low crime rate.

They have other uses, too, especially when it comes to wartime. They can be used as aerial scouts, or to carry messages between separate armies, something that a raven cannot be trained to do. They're closer to UAVs than to animals, now, doubly so if you consider how extremely good the eyesight of a bird is.

Like with the direwolves in canon, an animal that is often warg'd will develop a very strong bond with the person doing the warging, taking on traits - we see this in canon with how the personality of the direwolves develop - so a private animal, like Goldwing, will take on a lot of traits from their master...and in this case, Goldwing is...sort of chivalrous, if you can apply such a concept to a bird. However, the reverse is also true...which is why Donnel has to wait with an hourglass. If one stays in the skin of an animal too long, they'll start to become less and less human, till all that remains is a beast in human clothes.

And if you're wondering why Bran is worried about "playing games" inside the bird...just remember, he hasn't had the "talk" yet. In canon, he thought Jaime and Cersei were wrestling at first, and even here, where Catelyn tried even harder to shape Bran, he definitely doesn't know what they're on about.

Oh, and we hear a little more about the Green Men. They're not planting new wierwoods, at least, not outside the North, which is where they are most common, but they are tending to the ones in the South and ensuring that they're healthy and strong. The mountain clans have met them and the Green Men are actually welcomed by them, with the clansmen even knowing about the North and Winterfell...and about Ned, who they call "the Stark", or "the Ned," like the Northern clans might. If you can find a wierwood somewhere, the Green Men have either visited that area or are going to.

And they have a plan.
Anyway, Bran still dreams of being a member of the Kingsguard, and that's one of the main reasons he is practicing so hard at being a warg. He's hoping the ability might help him get in, so not only does he fly inside the bird, he goes hunting with it, though in those cases he usually spends his time outside the bird, not in it.

If there's anything I've left out of the summary and you have questions, just say
“I would rather be a bastard son of Winterfell than the trueborn heir to the Iron Islands.”

The words echoed through his mind like ripples on a lake. The bastard had said them years ago, but they felt as fresh as the first time he had heard them, not long after he came to Winterfell. He had still been little more than a boy when his father rebelled, when his brothers went off to war to win glory, to plunder the coasts of the Seven Kingdoms and to conquer distant shores, as all the Ironborn of old had. But what had they really won but an early grave? His father had thought the break between the wolf and the stag had been permanent, that the North might've even been willing to do what he had done and crown Eddard Stark the King in the North. It had been a grave mistake...and one that had cost the Iron Islands dearly. The Lannister fleet had been moored in their port when his uncle burnt them at harbor, man and ship alike being devoured by the hungry flames as they leapt from galley to galley. But the Darkstarks, when it became clear that the North was not going to break from the South, it had been his other uncle, Aeron, who had gone there with a fleet to attack them whilst they were vulnerable...only to find them already at sea and arrayed for war in a crescent.

They had known that his uncle was coming, probably because of a wandering seagull or some such creature that one of Lord Darkstark's wargs had been inside, and met his fleet head on, with the Mormonts on their flanks and the Golden Wolf in the center, the Darkstark flagship, a galley of mixed Northern and Westerlands heritage, with two-and-a-half decks and two hundred oars, scorpions bristling from bow to sterns...and as a figurehead there was a wolf of gold, with eyes of topaz that had room for a torch behind them...which made them glow a fiery orange. It must have looked like a beast from the depths of hell when it sailed into the heart of battle, and it had been Lord Beron who had led the boarding of his uncle's own command, the Golden Storm, a simple longship in comparison...and it had been that fight that cost his uncle an eye and an arm before he was tossed into the waves to die. He washed up near Lannisport a week later a changed man, spiritual and devoted to the Drowned God, a prisoner held within the Rock till the end of the war.

Just like the Starks hold me...I'm a prisoner here.

He swilled his wine as he heard the bastard again, his quick witted response that had made all the other boys laugh so long ago, the line that had turned them all against him before he ever had a chance to know them.

"I would rather be a bastard son of Winterfell than the trueborn heir to the Iron Islands."
men of the Iron Islands served as deckhands and sailors for the other realms, navigators helping their
greenlander captains ferry goods around, the same men that could have been captains in their own
right, leading warships and raiding parties wherever the crash of the waves could be heard, kings
upon their decks, taking what they wanted when they wanted it, not working for foreign captains for
a handful of coins.

It was even worse for their women, who were fucking whoever could pay for them, walking along
the quays of Lordsport and laying with the greenlanders and bringing their bastards into the world for
coppers. No one in the history of the Seven Kingdoms had ever fallen as far as his people, and yet it
seemed they were falling even further. Had the Drowned God abandoned them, right when they
needed him most?

He sighed and looked to the barkeep, a crusty man ever disappointed in his sons and daughters, with
more a few drops of Stark blood in his veins. "Another."

"Haven't you had enough yet, squid?" snarled the bartender, as angry as ever.

Even here, in one of the few taverns that didn't throw him out the moment he stepped through the
door, he wasn't always welcome. The North had smashed the Iron Islands alongside the rest of the
Seven Kingdoms, killing his brothers in the process, but he had been taken as a hostage, too, and he
had never once felt like he had a place at Winterfell, despite Lord Stark's hospitality.

He reached into his coin purse without looking and threw he man a coin, not caring what he
grabbed.

It glimmered golden in the light seconds before the tavern keeper snatched it up greedily, staring at
the gold dragon in awe before biting it to make sure it was real, making sure that his eyes weren't
lying to him. He dropped it into the pocket closest to his heart, then immediately poured Theon
another cup and left the nearly-full flagon next to him, no questions asked. It wasn't the best wine, it
wasn't Arbor Gold or a Dornish red, no, it was from some part of the Reach or the Riverlands, but he
didn't care much. *Being drunk stops me from thinking...about my home. My real home...*

He sighed again as he took a swallow of the sweet-but-sour red. The North drew its strength from
the sheer numbers of people it had, nourished upon the beef of their furred cows, just as the Reach
fed its people bread and vegetables. The two thrived off of their relation with one another, with
Lannister gold in the middle that only served to fuel the flames...but what were the Iron Islands,
when surrounded by giants? The only realm nearby with comparable strength were the Riverlands,
and they had the direwolf watching over them as if they were its pup. Elsewise, the North, the Reach
and the Westerlands, all three of them were stronger, far stronger than his homeland and getting more
powerful by the day, all while his was weakening. What would tomorrow make them? Would the
legacy of the Grey King come to an end with a quiet whimper, the Iron Islands being spoken about
in the same breath as the Stepstones and the Three Sisters?

*But what can I do...?*

He stared into the red in his cup, the surface as still as a calm ocean's day.

*I'm not even on the Iron Islands anymore, and I won't be till my father dies. I tried to run before and
the wargs caught me before I got close to leaving the city. What could I do if I got out? Run across
the North and the Riverlands, then swim the rest of the way?*

He sighed again in defeat. There was no way back to the Iron Islands, not yet, not till his father died,
but even if he made his way there, what could he do? The Iron Islands were merely a stopover between the great powers of Westeros, a place to put in and pick up fresh supplies before continuing onwards. The only resource his people had in any abundance, iron, was hard to mine, so they used thralls - prisoners they captured on their many raids - to dig it out and forge it. They couldn't raid the countless scores of ships going past them everyday, they came from the canal...and had the protection of the Starks. If there was one way to bring the entire fury of the North crashing down upon you, it was taking something that the North cared about. They didn't care for the South, or the Iron Throne, none of that had the interest of the lords of winter, but when someone did harm to something they truly cared about, the slumbering direwolf woke and used every last ounce of strength it had. Raiding...carrying out the Old Way and paying the iron price, none of it worked, not anymore, not since the wolf, the rose and the lion had trapped the kraken in a pond and learnt all his tricks.

He downed another cup, then poured himself another straight after.

_We can't keep living the way we are, it doesn't work...something has to change, before we all get killed._

He set his cup down onto the pine table, thinking, as he always did. Something had to change. He thought about his home often, trying to come up with a way to fix the Iron Islands, to give his people a future worth living for, where they could be powerful again, proud of the iron that flowed in their veins, where they might have some riches like the North, or even cities of their own...but he he had never managed to come up with anything, no matter how hard he tried. He drank and whored, to drown out the thoughts that always came to mind whenever he thought about what Jon had said, whenever he thought of what was surely happening on the Iron Islands, but sometimes he attended Lord Stark's court, watching and listening and learning about how the North ran, how it had grown so strong and how it was growing stronger, year by year. _But what works for them won't work for us._ _We don't have the land for pastures, the Iron Islands are hard, like us, and we do not sow. There's no point, nothing grows there anyway._

He looked into the depths of his wine, for any kind of answer he might find...only to start laughing at himself.

"I don't think the Drowned God is in my wine..." he muttered with half a laugh.

"Gods, boy, if you keep drinking like that you'll end up in a stupor," spoke the barkeep, walking over, having nothing better to do than speak with the man who paid him best.

"Might be I want to," Theon replied, starting to pour another cup into his cheaply made pewter cup. "Its hard to have problems when you can't walk straight."

The innkeeper laughed. "At this point, you won't be able to piss straight when that lot hits you."

Theon answered with a smile. "I don't pay you to keep me sober."

"Aye, and you pay well, too. Might be that I don't want my best drinker to get himself killed," the innkeeper took the flagon and walked with it to a cask behind the bar, refilling it to the brim before putting it besides him. "What are you drinking for, anyway? You go through more wine in a day than most people do in a fortnight."

"We've all got problems. Why'd you care about mine?" he asked, the cheap wine starting to make its way to his head.
The tavern keeper shrugged.

"Well, if you really want to know...you know who I am, so you know where I come from. I'm going to be lord of the Iron Islands someday, whenever my father dies, but...the North...it has so much more," he sighed again, "What's the point? I'll never have any of...this." He waved his hands drunkenly across the room, towards the door and the streets outside.

"When I was young, a boy younger than you, my father told me if I wanted something, I had to work for it. No one gets something good for free." He gestured to the roof over their heads with a smile. "You have to work for the things you want." Suddenly, he asked, "How many sons do I have?"

"What?"

"How many sons do I have?" asked the innkeeper again with a sly but proud smile.

"Two."

"Three," corrected the man, his smile never failing for a moment. "My eldest works here, my third son works here, aye, but my second, he's at the castle, training to be a guard. Might be he'll end up on the household guard one day, might be he could be Captain of the Guards or Master at Arms, even castellan."

"Why are you telling me all this?" he asked as he took a sip of his wine.

"Because you never know what tomorrow might bring. My grandsons might be sworn swords to the Starks, maybe their grandsons could be lords. You might start poor, like my father, but if you work hard...you can get good things."

...he has no idea what he's talking about. It can't be that simple.

"That might work for a tavern, but that's not a lordship. Lords get what they have, they can't make it better."

"Really?" the innkeeper "So a lord can't add parts onto their castles?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't," growled the innkeeper. "You can't make more land, that's right, but you can make what you have better. You get what you work for.

"You're starting to sound like an Ironborn," he laughed as he drank till his cup ran dry.

"Aye, squid, and you're meant to be iron, but to me you look like nothing but rust."

Theon glared at the innkeeper angrily. "Rust?" He rose from his seat. "Rust, you say?"

The man laughed. "Aye, rust, because you've lost the fire that makes you you, I can see it in your eyes, lad. You've given up."

"I haven't given up! I am Ironborn!" he shouted in anger. "We never give up! We take what we
want, when we want it!"

The man grinned. "Don't tell that to me. Tell it to yourself."

He wasn't even sure if it was him or the drink talking at this point, swaying as he stood.

*I have saltwater in my veins! I am *Ironborn* and we *never surrender!**

He stormed off, half angry and half bitter, but determination filled his heart just as wine filled his belly. *I won't let the isles go down without a fucking fight!* He tore his coin purse from his belt and hurled it across the room in anger.

Surprisingly, the tavernkeeper caught it with a grin, pulling the little bag open and scooping out all the coins inside, gold dragons, silver stags and copper stars alike. But Theon didn't care, not for a moment as he walked out, hearing only a faint mutter as he looked down the street...no, not down the street, past the street, past the walls of Winterfell, past the North...

...towards the shores of his distant home. The Iron Islands.

*I miss my mother...and Asha...she'd know what to do. Asha always knew what to do.*

Another one of the bastard's words came to mind as he thought of his fierce sister, who shielded him from the worst parts of their brothers, their cruel and hateful brothers who loved nothing more than to mock him. *But who's left to mock me now, Rodrik? You're dead, Maron's dead, but I'm still here! Me and Asha!* He laughed as he swayed his way towards Winterfell, tripping and stumbling as any drunk would. The guards sighed and grumbled under their breath as he passed through a barbican and into the castle courtyards...where he spied Adara, leaning down to grab a blue winter rose growing against the side wall of the First Keep, rump in the air ever-so-temptingly as she tried to get the rose from the ground without cutting her soft hands upon the thorns.

*I had her maidenhead...and I have her every other night, and tonight, too.* He grinned as he walked over, hearing her humming a tune with her beautiful voice. He walked up behind her and playfully gave her a little fondle...and she yelped in surprise, bolting upright and staring at him with skin as pale as bone and looking as though she was about to faint.

"Theon! What are you..oh gods...please don't..." she stammered, cowering backwards against the side walls of the First Keep in fear, afraid he might touch her again.

"Oh...bugger. That's not Adara."

"Oh...I thought you were your sister."

"My...my sister?" she breathed a sigh of relief, but stared at him with fear in her eyes all the same. "She's...in your chambers, I think..."

He smiled at her, and seemed to shrink down against the walls even more. Then he turned and walked away from her and into the keep, paying no attention to the happenings around him. He went up the stairs, through the warm halls...and entered his chambers, which were comfortably large, only a little smaller than the ones he had at Pyke, but much better fitted, part of Lord Stark's efforts to make him feel more at home.

He heard a soft growl from his bed...and spied the other Darkstark girl lying under his covers.
"So there you are. It's not nice to leave a lady all on her lonesome..." she teased with a smile. "I've been waiting for hours, so I've had to keep myself "busy."

He smiled back at her as he walked over. She sniffed the air, and frowned. "You've been drinking, haven't you?"

"Aye, is that bad?"

"Only if you've drank so much that you're a floppy squid." She smiled again, a smile that drove him mad to see. gods, she might not be the prettiest but she can drive a man wild.

He had bedded her a hundred times, if not more, but who hadn't had her at least once? Still, he had a fondness for the lustful she-wolf and her insatiable appetite, with her being his favorite partner beneath the fur blankets that covered his bed.

"That never happens, Ada, and you know it," he grinned.

She laughed, and with a daring look in her eyes, she asked, "Prove it."

He threw off his clothes and joined her beneath the covers...and like he said, he was not a floppy squid.

Then he fell asleep.

When he woke again, Adara was missing, the sun had set, the warmth of all that wine had turned to a throbbing headache and his back stung everywhere the she-wolf had scratched when he had took her. gods...what was I doing earlier? I can't remember anything...I know it was something important, but wha-

Then it struck him, like the blow of a hammer.

Asha.

He threw his clothes on, not caring for something to eat or drink just yet, not when he couldn't remember anything from before his slumber, nothing but his sister...and that he needed her help, now, more than ever before. He walked out of his room and headed towards the rookery to send a message, mind ablaze as he thought of the first words his sister and his entire family would hear from him since he left the Iron Islands.

Then, piece by piece, a plan started to come together.

I can't leave Winterfell, they won't let me, but there's nothing stopping her from coming here...

****

End of Part 7!
****
End of Part 7!
I'll be honest, I had some trouble with this part...but in the end, I think it came out pretty well! It actually went through a number of revisions, like once where the entire part was one big Adara and Theon scene from start to finish, between rounds of boinking, but I thought this was better! Though, I might write the other for a little bit of practice and let people choose between the two

Theon's a...little worse off than he was in canon, simply put. He has come from a land that had no cities and no great wealth, so when he arrived in the North a few years ago it absolutely awed him. He had never seen a city before, or such a display of wealth, even though the Northerners are certainly modest with how they use their coin, so it hit him really, really hard. When he arrived at Winterfell, he not only had to come to face with now being the heir to the Iron Islands, but being one of the lesser fish there amongst the lords - especially if you judge one's might by the amount of coin they have - and even worse, he had to face those problems alone, with Robb and his wolves wanting little to do with him.

So, he's latched onto the one thing he knew, the one source of calm amongst the storm: his memories of home and his family. They might not have been the best family, and his father might not have been kind either, but they're the only family he has ever truly known. He feels like he doesn't belong in Winterfell, and is certainly jealous of Robb and Jon, wanting a city of his own.

But then there is the other part: the desire to make the Iron Islands strong, a force to be reckoned with. As the power of the North, the Lannisters and the Tyrells continues to rise, the Iron Islands are going to be surrounded by powerful realms on all sides, so a part of him believes that the Old Way just won't work anymore, but another part of him knows that doing nothing would just result in them falling so far behind they'll never be a great power again. He might not know the reality of what is going on at the Iron Islands, but he has an idea, and really, really wants to help the people he rules over, however he can.

But another part of him has romanticized the Ironborn way of life, the Old Way and the idea of paying the Iron Price for things, and that innkeeper brought it out.

He's stuck between believing in the old ways, and trying to find a new one, so he's turning to the one person he trusts the most in the world: his sister, Asha.

And then you have the first mention of the North's flagship on the western coast, the Golden Wolf, a ship that is half Westerman and half Northern by design, with a solid gold wolf on the front that came from nowhere else but the Westerlands. Aeron Greyjoy is still alive, thank the Drowned God, but he's lost an eye and an arm.
Eddard I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Eddard flipped through the pages of his ledger, through years of Northern history and financing, with the first few pages written in the smooth hand of his father and not his own. Every year showed a little bit more growth in the numbers, more gold dragons pouring into the vaults of Winterfell, a little bit more being taxed by the Iron Throne, but otherwise the Economy was thriving and growing year after year. His father had kept a tidy book, neatly organizing the numbers into categories with little notes at the side to say what was happening in the world and how that was affecting the North's economy. Every major house in the North had their own section where their tax income was reported, showing where money was coming from and going to, then those numbers were broken down again to show where his vassals got their money and what their own expenditures were, giving him a rough estimate of their own wealth, too. It had taken years of practice for him to get used to managing the North's finances himself, even though it was the duty of his steward to manage the finances of Winterfell and the North, his father had always taught him that it was best for him to take a look at the books himself every once in a while, to see how prosperous the North was at a moment's glance.

One look at these pages can tell me more than months of travel, but that does not mean that I do not see my people in person and see how they are living.

He was in the Den, a cosy, warm and quiet room for him to retire to that was nestled in the heart of Winterfell's great keep. It had all the functions of his solar, but it was more out of the way, a place of solitude for him to think and relax in private, away from the stresses of normal life. Bookcases lined the walls on either side of him, packed with carefully kept old books bound in thick leather. They were not histories or the thoughts of maesters, they were money ledgers and journals, thoughts and ideas from Stark lords of old long since dead, plans and ambitions that had been passed down from one generation to the next, recording every event of importance in the North's history for generations, saying why his ancestors, the Starks who ruled Winterfell before him and before his father, had done what they had.

They were accompanied by letters from noble houses long since extinct and ancient maps that grew more faded and had less and less noble houses the further back in time they went, some few even showing Winterfell as a castle and not as the great city it had become. Silver sconces dotted the gaps between the bookcases, carefully made so that the torches inside them shown as bright as they could, with a gigantic snowbear pelt covering the floor, so vast it stretched from the left bookcases to the ones on the right and with the head in front of his study and the tiny block of hair that was the tail in front of the door. Even now, over a decade after his father and his elder brother had died at King's Landing, murdered by the Mad King Aerys, it was still hard to see the Den as being truly his. He had only been inside the room once in his childhood, when his father told that he was going to the Vale to be fostered; his clever father, who no fox could match in cunning. Even now I still cannot know for sure what plans he made inside these walls. His books only say half of it all, about meetings with Olenna Tyrell and Tywin Lannister...with page after page of confusing half-truths and riddles.

Father, what were you planning?

He signed off on the ledger, taking his quill from its ink pot and writing his name and title on the
bottom of the page, showing that he had seen and reviewed the numbers for the year Two Hundred and Ninety Seven after Aegon’s Conquest, adding in a few notes for namedays, feasts and other such events besides expenses to explain where they came from. His eyes lingered upon the interest payments from the Iron Throne, a great sum of gold and silver shipped in a dozen coffers from the Red Keep to White Harbor before being escorted the rest of the way by his own men. They were efforts of his king, his friend Robert Baratheon to pay off his debts, but he was paying the barest amount he could, not even making an impact in his great debt of half a million gold dragons. The Faith in the South were not fond of the idea of interest, calling it usury and a sin, but the Old Gods had no such qualms and neither did the merchants from across the Narrow Sea, who had taught the North how to manage money on a vast scale. The North kept its own account with the Iron Bank of Braavos, a place where the savings of his family could be kept for generations on end, a little bit more added whenever he could, a place where gold dragons left and returned with hatchlings as the Iron Bank used some of his family's fortunes for loans across the Narrow Sea, returning a small piece of the profits they made into the accounts of his family and using that again for more loans, so they gained a little bit more each and every time, generation after generation. Now, they had a few million gold dragons stored away beneath the Iron Bank, two centuries of interest. The Starks did not spend their gold often, letting it pile up in the reserves of Winterfell and of the Iron Bank rather than throwing it away on baubles and other such pointless things. Winter was coming, so having a vast reserve of gold that could be used at a moment's notice in times of need was of the utmost importance.

He had taken a hundred thousand gold dragons from the vaults of Winterfell at the start of the Rebellion, a hundred thousand to pay for the costs of assembling the mighty host of Northern troops, to pay them for the length of the campaign, to assemble the enormous supply train he needed to carry an offensive into the South and to put all the ships of the North to sea for action at a moment's notice. We brought not just the troops needed to win the war, but the gold, too. You cannot win a war with men and ships alone.

There was a quiet tapping on the door, so he closed the ledger and returned his quill to its resting place. "Come in."

In stepped his maester and trusted adviser, Luwin, who had helped the midwife bring his children into the world. The maester's chain dangled heavy from his neck, the smoky black Valyrian steel link glittering in the light of the torches and in his hand he had a number of letters, with all manners of crests and a rainbow's worth of colored wax seals. "My lord, messages, from White Harbor and the other holds, along with one from across the Narrow Sea. The Iron Bank, my lord."

He walked over and handed them to his liege lord, setting them down upon the table. Eddard took the pale white one with the thick grey wax seal of the Iron Bank first. "I was just looking through the ledgers," he said as he took his letter opener and slid it through the grey wax scales that sealed the letter. It was a statement from the Iron Bank, written upon the exotic and very expensive bone white paper that came only from Yi Ti in the furthest reaches of the known world, every letter written in an ink that was as black as the darkest night.

To our cherished friend and honorable business partner, Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell,

The year of two hundred and ninety seven since Aegon’s Conquest was a great one for the Iron Bank of Braavos, with the representatives of the bank resolving a trade dispute between Myr and Pentos, as well as opening formal relations with the realms of the Summer Islands. It has been one of the most profitable years in the history of the Bank, with all its customers great and small thriving because of it. As requested in the days of your noble lord father - may his rest be peaceful - here is the annual report on the accounts of house Stark.
One hundred thousand gold dragons had been deposited into our vaults two centuries ago at the negotiated interest rate of two percent per year, which brings the accounts of the Stark family to five million, four hundred and forty one thousand six hundred and sixty six gold dragons, alongside change of silver stags and copper stars rounded down.

He stared at the vast number with a mix of happiness and awe. It had been almost the entire wealth of his family nearly two hundred years ago, sent across the Narrow Sea after months of negotiation with the Iron Bank to get the best rates that the Lord of Winterfell could get, who had bartered with the Bank while it was drastically weakened after the Dance of the Dragons. Now, the North could make two hundred thousand dragons in a decade and their incomes were only rising. They were still nowhere near as wealthy as the Lannisters of Casterly Rock, who could throw mountains of gold at any problem they faced without so much as a dip in their coffers, but they were a match for the Reach, man for man and coin for coin. Both the North and the Reach drew their wealth from their fields, with the Reach growing grains and acting as the bakery and the garden of the Seven Kingdoms, while the North tended to great herds of furred cows and was the slaughterhouse and butchery of the realm. The furred cows had made the North stronger, richer than ever before, a true power to be reckoned with in the lands of Westeros. The North in the days of the last king, Torrhen, could field an army of thirty thousand men, less than half as many as he had when he went south with seventy thousand in Robert's Rebellion, but Torrhen had to scrape the bottom of the barrel to do it, gathering up every man strong enough to carry a weapon, from farmhands to blacksmiths to merchants and nobles, but now the North could field an army of a hundred thousand swords and they were trained men-at-arms, professional warriors, not peasant levies or arrow fodder.

In his grief after surrendering the ancestral crown of the Kings of Winter, it had been Torrhen and his bastard brother Brandon Snow who had found the furred cows in the first place while visiting the northern mountain clans as they had travelled through the North together. His brother hoped that seeing the realm he ruled might raise the spirits of the former king, so they toured the realm together escorted by only a handful of retainers and in the midst of a powerful snowstorm they had become separated from their meager escort and by chance, after wandering in search of their group, they stumbled upon the great orange haired beasts, seeing them utterly unfazed by the cold winds or the heavy snowfall. The two brothers instantly saw their great potential and gathered up a herds worth with their escort after the storm died, then they returned to Winterfell after cutting their travels short. Since then, the North had never been the same; Torrhen buried himself in work, dedicated the rest of his life to ensuring that the North got the most out of the wondrous creatures, claiming that they were the key to the North's future, a gift from the Old Gods themselves. He immediately set to work gathering the best herdsmen and cattle breeders from throughout the North, though the lords of the North were skeptical of his words and his blind belief that such a simple thing as a cow with fur instead of fat would be the North's salvation, claiming that he had gone mad from his sorrow. However, they had no choice but to eat such thoughts when he held a feast in the midst of a long, terrible winter.

After the winter came to an end, the powerful creatures spread across the lands of the North like a wildfire, every lord realizing the potential of an animal that could graze in the fields in days so cold that normal cows would freeze to death in their barns. Though he had lost the crown, he had given the North something far more valuable than any title: a cheap, reliable and plentiful food supply. The people of his realm high and low gave him a new title to replace the one he lost when he knelt before the Conqueror - Torrhen Beefking. Torrhen knew that for the North to thrive, he had to mend our food supply. The North needs people like a castle wall needs building blocks and people need food to live.

Since then, the North had grown and prospered in its splendid isolation, staying out of the affairs of the South for as long as they could, content to focus on internal matters and growth. While King
Maegor the Cruel was breaking the back of the Faith Militant, collecting the scalps of the Warrior's Sons and Poor Fellows to feed to Balerion, the North was resting and recovering. When the dragons danced against one another in the skies of Westeros and the Seven Kingdoms fractured into open civil war, the North sent a handful of troops to show who they supported, but remained content to work long and hard at home. There they raised new walls and new keeps for the first time in generations, rebuilding he old castles and holdfasts, mending the wounds of the past and sending gold across the Narrow Sea, reopening trade with the Free Cities and beginning the long work of restoring the fleets of the North to their former glory. Cregan Stark went south and spoke - the Hour of the Wolf - and the entire realm quaked at the sound of his voice. When Aegon the Unworthy made the realm bleed by giving Blackfyre to his bastard son after the failures of Baelor the Blessed, the North raised an army, not of warriors to fight and to die in the battles of the South, but an army of laborers with the order to build the great canal and to cut the land in twain, as none had ever done before. Nothing had changed Westeros as much as the canal had before or since, not even the construction of the Wall. The South held that that Brandon the Builder had started the construction, built half of it even before he died, but the truth was more than that, more complex as the truth tended to be; he *really* had started work on the construction, but he had only completed a third of it before he became too frail to travel and abandoned the work his mastery of architecture and giants had started but could not finish. It had been Myrish engineers, armed with glass eyes and wooden cranes powered by oxen that had finished what he had started so long ago. Brandon the Builder had a legendary grasp on the knowledge of construction, but his plans had been flawed and were incomplete, the metalworking and mathematics of the time were simply not advanced enough for such a construction, but they had finally come of age with the Valyrian Freehold and had matured enough to make it possible.

There were dozens of books about the canal and its impact on the Seven Kingdoms now. It had made Oldtown change what it was, strengthened Lannisport, Gulltown, White Harbor and the whole North and it had ripped out the heart of Dorne. In a rash decision they had even once threatened war in the wake of the Blackfyre Rebellion, so angered by the canal and how it had changed the flow of trade away from their shores, but as they gathered their spears for a new conflict they saw the golden lion of the Lannisters - battered and bruised but *unbroken* by the Blackfyre Rebellion - come to stand at the side of the direwolf who was helping them recover from the costly war, then the tigers and elephants of Volantis joined them, the crossbows and craftsmen of Myr, the fleets and wealth of Braavos. They did not demand Dorne to back down, no, they *ordered* it to, a command that rattled the very foundations of the Seven Kingdoms when they were at their weakest. The North, seeing allies coming to its side and confident that their trade lanes were safe and that the Dornish would draw their swords and complain but do little more, returned to its long slumber to grow and to rest for another century, as uninterested in the affairs of the Southron as ever, contemptuous of their games of politics and intrigue and petty squabbles. But under his father...the direwolf had started to wake, taking more and more interest in the happenings south of the Neck, watching and waiting from afar. The Lannisters and the Starks grew close and closer, the wolf and the lion acting as allies and even the rose had joined them later on, the three greatest powers in the Seven Kingdoms working together with plans and interests all of their own. For a time, he thought that he might have been sent to the great golden fortress of Casterly Rock to be a ward, or to Highgarden in the land of flowers and knights. He had never expected to be sent to the Eyrie.

But that was a time long ago now, a time when he had an elder brother who was to be the Lord of Winterfell and husband to Catelyn Tully, a stern but caring and loving father and a wild sister no one could or would dare to control, as fierce as any direwolf should be.

He sighed sadly at the old memories, then he continued with the letter, the rest of which were simply dry numbers and information about how the Stark fortunes would continue to increase over the years to come and an invitation to visit the Iron Bank to see his family's wealth in person, in the vaults of
the Iron Bank, though that was clearly a front to try and get him to renegotiate terms now that the 
Iron Bank was much stronger than it had been when the Lord of Winterfell forced his terms on 
them.

"My lord, you look troubled," said his maester with a frown of concern. "Is everything arlight?"

He looked at his maester, seeing the concern on his old face and answering truthfully. "It is nothing, 
maester...just memories."

He took the next letter, sealed with the green and blue merman of the Manderly's and written in the 
hand of Lord Wyman himself, a jovial and friendly man, as large as the cows he supped upon, but 
perhaps the most loyal of his bannermen. He proudly reported the completion and commissioning of 
another six vessels for the North's eastern fleet, two war galleys and four holks to serve as their 
escorts, ready to go onto patrols or on trade missions. The three decked war dromonds of the South 
were unsuitable for the colder, rougher waters of the North, where icebergs were a threat even in 
summer and where the size of the ocean that the North had to patrol meant that small, fast sailing 
ships were more useful than large, slow ones moved by oars. Holks were much smaller than 
dromonds, the largest being roughly equivalent to a ship of two decks, with their roots in the river 
going vessels of the White Knife and the Weeping Water rather than the cogs that sailed the seas, but 
they were much faster than any dromond, more maneuverable, cheaper and quicker to build in large 
numbers. They were easier to supply and repair due to their simple construction, and they could 
quickly and easily be turned into merchant ships in times of peace, or into transports and warships 
when the war horns howled their grim note. For the price and time of building 
a single dromond, six holks could be built and they were so simple a design that a fishing 
village could mend any damage they took or even build a new one, albeit a small one. They were so 
simple it was practically effortless to turn them into merchant ships, which meant they could even 
pay off their own construction costs within a few short years.

They were the ideal choice for a Northern admiral that was hunting pirates, as their speed meant that 
a pack of them, a wolf pack, could chase down a single galley and force them into a battle on the 
attackers terms where the lone ship would be hopelessly outclassed, even though one galley carried 
far more weapons and men than a single holk, but the speed of the lighter, smaller ships let them 
force battles and stopped a heavier, slower galley from being able to make use of most of their 
weapons, turning them into large floating targets just waiting to be destroyed one piece at a time. But 
in a clash of two fleets upon the waves, they were less useful, so the North had no choice but to still 
build war galleys for battles at sea, but even there the humble holk found a purpose by running down 
any enemy ships that tried to flee the battle, forcing them to strike their colors and surrender or be 
boarded by a ship with holds packed with dozens of men trained and equipped for a fight at sea, 
wearing heavier armor than any sailor and carrying grapnels, crossbows and swords.

Then there was another letter from the Dreadfort, sealed with a screaming head made from soft pink 
wax. Lord Bolton has been wanting Sansa and his son married for years, but she is not even of age 
yet. This letter was much like all the others, a subtle hint from Lord Roose Bolton that he would like 
the wedding to occur sooner rather than later, telling Eddard how he had found a suitable dower for 
Sansa in the countryside that would make for a fine estate, nestled within some rolling hills in the 
Bolton lands, far from the small city that surrounded the Dreadfort, but easy to travel to and from and 
certainly capable of providing for his eldest daughter should she outlive her potential husband, 
though they were not formally betrothed, not yet anyway, but they were extremely close already. But 
I will not have them betrothed, not for a few more years. Should things fall apart between the two 
and their love breaks apart, I will not have her forced into a marriage she would not want to be a 
part of. I would never allow it.
Domeric was a kind and brave man with a gentle heart, interested not in whoring, drinking or fighting, but in reading, listening and learning about the past from whoever or whatever could help him on his quest for more knowledge. He could compose fine pieces of poetry and playing the harp was but another of his passions, but he was a talented jouster too, a natural when it came to steeds of all kinds with a bright future in the tourney lists of the South.

But all that added up to a man who Eddard prayed would never meet Robert Baratheon face to face when the king was drunk, one he would never let anywhere near Winterfell had he already been married. But he would not stop his children marrying for love, he would never marry them off to someone against their will, he could never live with himself for doing so, but so long as Sansa loved Domeric, he was happy for the young couple and gave them both his blessings. He set Lord Bolton's letter aside, then turned his attention to the last one, which bore the twelve towers of Moat Cailin in a circle of dark green wax. This one was damaged, soaked with water and stained with circles of scarlet blood, too.

"What happened to the raven that delivered this message?" he asked as the letter dripped onto his study in blooming splotches of red and black.

"I am afraid it died, my lord, whether from blood loss or infection, I cannot be certain. It must have been attacked by an eagle on the way here," Eddard sighed and quickly took his letter opener and slid it through the wax, hoping to read as much of the message as he could before too much ink was lost. "It was fortunate that the bird made it here at all, my lord."

The parchment had been torn and ripped through where the eagle's talons had shredded the leather wrapping used to protect the message from the elements as the raven flew on its long journey from castle to city. Ravens were fast and clever birds, able to outwit most predators or outrun those they couldn't, but if they got caught by even a young golden eagle, it would take a miracle for the strongest ravens to stand a chance of surviving the fight, with winning it being nigh impossible. Goldwing was a gigantic eagle and was still growing, larger than any other eagle he had seen in his time in the Vale bar one he had glimpsed after having far too many cups of a strong Stormlander ale with Robert in the Eyrie, when both of them were still little more than boys. The cask had been sent by his castellan as a gift for his twelfth nameday and they had half of it between the both of them, getting so drunk they came up with a game where they got flails from the armory and smashed the spiked balls from their chains, then struck them with their wooden practice swords to see who could send them flying the furthest off the mountain's peak. It was a game that Robert won nine times out of ten, even though he had only begun to start growing into his full strength at the time. On one attempt, with a rusty ball of iron and Robert roaring with a determination to drive it as far as he could, he struck the ball with so much force he shattered it into a dozen pieces alongside the oaken longsword he hit it with, the rusted pieces scattering as they shot through the skies...then, when they hit the ground in the distant trees, he saw a great bird as big as a house throw itself into the sky with a single flap of its monstrous wings, then fly away. Robert stared agape at the sight of the giant bird, he had seen it too, but when they told their foster father Jon Arryn he had laughed it off and told them it was the drink, making them both see things that weren't there, then scolded the both of them for breaking every ball and chain the Eyre had. He was probably right, Jon Arryn usually is. But there are so many eagles in the North now they are starting to become a problem. They hunt ravens, they attack calves, lambs and hens and are growing more and more daring with every passing year.

He shook his head with a sigh as he opened the letter and saw all the text smudged and runny beyond any recognition, the parchment a mess of blood, ink and water. But he could still make out a few words on the parchment, though not a whole sentence.

...Lannister...North...King...tolls...?
He stared at the paper for a moment before sighing again. "My lord?" asked his maester.

"The letter does not make any sense anymore, not with so few words left."

He folded it closed and set it down away from all the other letters to keep it from staining the other messages. He picked up the ledger and rose from the seat, holding the book carefully under his arm. It was time to hold court, so he walked over to an empty space amongst the other books and slid it in at the end of a row of four others, each holding nearly twenty years of financing. They were a monument to the growth of the North and the strength of its people, with the oldest book written nearly fifty years after the end of Aegon's Conquest. In those times, the North was still poor, much poorer than it was today, closer to the Stormlands than to the Reach or the Vale, but now the North's Incomes were tied for second and on par with the Reach, the two regions making more money than the rest of the Seven Kingdoms aside from the Westerlands, though the reserves of the Lannisters were much larger than those of anyone else, simply because of how many gold mines there were in their lands and how little Tywin Lannister cared for the objections of the Faith when he charged interest upon his loans. Eddard was never concerned at all by the fact that the Westerlands made more money than the North - literally, since most of the crown mints were in the Westerlands besides the gold mines - like his forefathers, he preferred to stay out of southeren affairs and politics, just as the North had always done before his father in the days since Aegon's Conquest.

Besides, Robert and Jon Arryn are doing a fine job together in the capital, I am sure. I would gladly help either of them if they asked for it.

Robert had been utterly crushed after the end of the Rebellion. His heart had been broken and his dream of being Eddard's good brother stolen from him with the death of Lyanna, a death he mourned as much as Eddard had. So many of the North's sons that had been fostered at Winterfell had followed his brother to King's Landing either to die or to be thrown into the dungeons of the Red Keep and left to rot till the city fell, that it came down to only those who who had not been at Winterfell when his brother and many of those who followed him rode to their deaths. Theo Wull had been with his clan for one of their feasts, Willam Dustin had been with his wife and had been "busy" getting her with child and Howland Reed had been recalled to his lands for whatever reason. It been those three who had been his companions throughout the war, alongside the ferocious Greatjon Umber, who went into battle with a greatsword of castle forged steel bigger than Ice and could slaughter a dozen men in the time it took him to defeat a single foe. They found many more of the Northern lords and heirs still alive thanks to Tywin Lannister. His sack of King's Landing had been a bloody massacre for the guards who had opened the gates for him in the expectation that he had come to help them, even worse for the men holding the Red Keep, but it had saved the lives of many of the men who had ridden with his brother, though some had already died, either because of the Mad King's torturers or claimed by the skeletal hand of starvation, like Martyn Cassel had. Mark Ryswell had been on the brink of death from his wounds when the city fell, had it not been for the Lord Lannister ensuring that he was treated quickly he would have never survived the war.

But...then there was the children, the little princess Rhaenys and her baby brother Aegon. He saved many of my friends, but that does not forgive what happened to the children...gods, the children. "They were caught in the crossfire," he said, "Elia tried to flee with them to Dragonstone," but I saw the bodies and a half-dozen red and gold quarrels sticking out of the princesses' back...and the boy...gods, he hadn't a head.

He had argued with Robert openly when he saw the bodies, appalled at how the man who had been his brother dismissed their deaths so quickly as a necessity, a wounded Barristan Selmy watching the both of them as Jon Arryn tried to settle the argument as he always had, but in the end, it never mattered. There was still one last battle to be fought in the war, the only battle that truly mattered to him. Lyanna. He knew where she was, more or less, and she was protected by the final two members
of the Kingsguard...but that was one of the biggest mysteries of them all. Robert had almost been slain by the dragon prince in the waters of the Trident, barely defeating him after a long and hard fight that had left him gravely wounded, even though the Targaryen loyalists had been outnumbered nearly three to one. He had finally gained the upper hand after catching the prince off balance by swinging in the opposite direction that Rhaegar had expected, crumpling his left shin and sending him crashing into the waters before Robert brought down a killing blow upon his head. It didn't matter whether or not the prince was wearing his helmet, it would never had made a difference either way. Eddard had saw the remains, it was as though someone crushed a peach in the midst of a gauntleted fist, he was utterly unrecognizable even to Barristan Selmy. But there had never been a sign of Arthur Dayne in the entire battle, not a trace of him aside from a bloody Dawn being found amongst the dead Dayne men after the battle was over, enough to show that he had been on the field in the first place. Some thought he had stripped off his white armor and cloak to fight amongst the men of his house so that he would not be given any special treatment as a hostage, others that he had bloodied the blade and ran, leaving the sword as one last act of honor before fleeing the battle, but no one knew what had happened for certain. Robert was in no state for another fight after his duel, it had been a miracle he survived at all, an even greater one that he recovered from his wounds harder and stronger, so he could not argue with Eddard for long, not when the Grand Maester gave him milk of the poppy as he set to work on saving the king's life.

So Eddard went alone with his companions to put an end to the war and finish what they had initially set out to do, with one extra following them. Tygett Lannister, eager to prove his skill at blades and to earn himself a place in history outside of his brother's shadow after the two had yet another argument in the Red Keep, in front of their new king no less. He had no love for the head of his family, so he had followed Eddard to Dorne, disobeying the Lord Lannister's order for him to return to the Rock and to serve as his brother's castellan. He was a great swordsman, a demon with a blade in his hand, the man who had taught his nephew Jaime how to fight, though the young white cloak had more natural talent and agility, going into battle with a parrying dagger and a longsword together rather than sword and shield. Eddard had been reluctant at first, but Tygett was eager to fight and an experienced swordsman and he knew he might need another blade against the final two white cloaks. So, they rode long and fast into Dorne, knowing that was where the prince had taken her, listening to the tales of the peasantry to give them an idea of where she had went, Tygett and he paying in gold and silver for the barest scraps of information that could help them find his sister. He might not have had any love for the Lannisters anymore, not after the Sack, but he put that aside for the time being, for the sake of his sister.

Together, with Howland Reed, the Greatjon Umber, Theo Wull, Willam Dustin and Tygett Lannister, they rode to the Tower of Joy, a band of heroes with a single quest in mind, to rescue his sister, like something out of a song, a legend like those Old Nan would tell to him and his family when they were so much younger and smaller, children listening to her stories with their father watching them with a smile. The sun had been low in the sky, bathing the land in a dark crimson as the sun rose upon the dawn of a new day, the tower's shadow stretching across the distance, revealing it to them with the glimmer of plate armor and the fluttering white of cloaks like sails. They rode towards the tower as swift as the wind and when they got close he demanded they surrender and release his sister, to swear fealty to their new king, as Barristan Selmy had. The Lord Commander was steadfast, refusing to recognize Robert Baratheon as his new king, refusing to disobey the final order his prince had given him, even in death. Tygett told them how Jaime had killed their king by driving his blade into his back, but they simply called him a false brother, an oathbreaker, saying how he would have never managed to do it had they been there and not at the Tower carrying out the wishes of their slain prince, and when they heard of how Barristan had joined Robert's side, they acknowledged his bravery for fighting against him and told him that twas his choice to make...and that they had made theirs.
Then she screamed. A long and high howl and the entire world exploded into action at the sound of her pain.

Theo Wull went for the Lord Commanded, backed by Tygett Lannister, with Eddard and Howland Reed focusing all their attention against Oswell Whent with the Greatjon at their side, more an animal than a man. The keys dangled from the Lord Commander's belt, but the muscular knight was able to fight both of them well, though he was gradually being driven back against the walls of the tower. Any ill will Eddard might have bore for the Lannisters started to ebb away as Tygett risked life and limb for his sister's sake, fighting the Lord Commander to a standstill after Theo was shoved away by the White Bull. Oswell fought valiantly and bravely, but he was the first to fall before the brute power of their group and the weight of numbers, being out maneuvered and outmatched. Howland Reed darted around him fast and deadly, slipping his spear through the joints of his armor, a death by a thousand stabs till the Greatjon wrestled him from behind, opening him up for Willam to hamstring him, forcing him to one knee...and then Eddard came in with Ice raised and with a single killing blow he took the Whent knight's head from his shoulders, helmet and head falling to the ground and rolling away from one another with a soft thump and a clank. Then they turned their attention to the Lord Commander in time to watch him thrust his sword into Theo's bell and rip him open before shoving him off his sword with a slam of his huge shoulders. Tygett rushed him, as brave and as fierce as any lion, holding him at bay as the Wull crawled away from the fight with one hand, trying to put his bowels back in with the other, giving him a fighting chance before the Lord Commander could finish him off. He ran as fast as his body could take him, coming into the fight...at the exact moment the White Bull thrust for him, holding the grip of his longsword with one hand and the blade with the other for more strength. His blade was out of the way with no time to raise it, no time to block or to parry or to dodge, only time to die when the blade struck him.

Or he would have died, had it not been for Tygett Lannister taking the blow to the side of his armor. There was so much force behind it his blade wobbled and warped as it breached the Lannister's plate at its weakest point, biting through steel and cloth and into the flesh beneath, at the right side, almost a miss as it clipped past his side. But it was enough to take him out of the fight, sending him crashing to the ground in pain, clutching at the side of his armor as blood dripped from inside, falling unconscious from the pain of what could have been a killing blow had it been a little further to the left. Eddard defended the fallen lion, Ice clashing against the Lord Commander's steel as the other men hammered at him. He was strong, large and muscular, built like a watchtower, with thick plate that was nigh impossible to break through, even for the Valyrian steel greatsword he wielded. Even the Greatjon Umber could not match him strength for strength, and though the Lord Commander had begun to tire from the lengthy fight, he still had a lot of energy in him. He slammed into the Greatjon Umber with his shield and sent the giant Northman reeling, moving in for a quick flurry to finish him.

Then Howland Reed hurled his net and sent him crashing to the ground, tangled tightly and knocked out of the fight by the most simple of weapons. He had fought against such tricks before, against the Kingswood Brotherhood and quickly started to free himself, tossing and rolling and trying to get a grip of the edge so as to pull it off of him.

But Howland Reed never gave him the opportunity. He leapt onto him with a dagger - long and thin to slip through the gaps of a knight's armor and to give the crippled men after a battle a swift and painless death - and thrust it through his visor in single quick, fluid movement. In an instant, the White Bull that had fought the strongest men in the North to a standstill was dead, slain with ease by a diminutive crannogman, even if he had not chosen the most honorable of weapons or methods to do so. Theo Wull was limp with skin as pale as curdled milk, Tygett Lannister unconscious with no idea of what battle was raging above him and the Greatjon winded with ribs cracked by the force of the hit. Quickly, as his sister cried out again, Brandon's name, his, the name of all her family and
even Robert's at one point, he took the keys from the slain Lord Commander's belt and rushed up the steps...the rest was too painful too painful to think about even now, a decade and a half after the fight. But he had made a promise, one he would keep so long as he had the strength in his body to do so. Then they left, with her body and the bodies of the slain, riding to Starfall and sending Tygett Lannister back to Casterly Rock after he was tended to by the maester, enough to keep him alive for the journey, though he hadn't woken by the time he left upon the ship. Then, finally, he returned Dawn to the family to which it belonged...and then he returned North himself, Robert coming to Winterfell after he had recovered from his wounds for the burial of his betrothed in the crypts.

He sighed and took his mind off the topic, even now so many years later it still hurt to think about it. So, to keep his mind away from those thoughts, he turned to his trusted maester as they walked and asked, "Have you met Robb's new mentor, yet? What do you think of him?"

It is best to think of the future and not the past. We cannot change what has already happened in our lives, no matter how much we might try, but we never know what tomorrow might bring.

"I have, my lord," said Luwin with a wise smile and a nod. "He is certainly skilled in the ways of warcraft, especially as a strategist...but there are some odd things I have noticed, nothing bad, merely...curious of him."

He raised an eyebrow, curious as to the maester's thoughts. "What do you mean?"

He seems to be an honest man to me. He will seem a little curious to us, but he is a Volantene, it is only natural since he comes from so far away.

"He keeps the old gods of the Valyrian pantheon, my lord, then at other times he speaks about the Freehold as if it were still around. But he has a very fine mind and is well versed in our history. He will be an excellent mentor for Robb, I am sure, but if I may ask, my lord, why did you hire a Volantene tiger to teach him?"

"I thought it would be best for his tutor to have a different perspective of the world than Ser Rodrik, that way he might learn a different way of seeing things as well as different strategies and tactics."

The North had been friends with the Volantenes for years, since the canal had been completed, but even before then the relations between the North and the Free Cities had been improving for years as the trade lanes between the North and Essos started to become more and more lucrative. The relationship between the direwolf and the tiger was one of gain for both parties, with ships sailing back and forth between the two realms often, bringing white sugar, exotic spices and soft silks to the North in exchange for silver, ice, beef and soap, to name a few of the most common goods found in the holds of the merchants that plied the routes between the North and Volantis. The North had great shipyards and skilled shipwrights to work in them, especially in White Harbor, where they were fed by timbers floated down from the Wolfswood on the back of barges and tar from the Neck. Every resources used to build and maintain a fleet were in abundance in the North and in the Narrow Sea, to have a fleet was to be powerful and dangerous, a force to be reckoned with. A fleet can raid a trade route and blockade a city if there are enough ships. The magisters of the Narrow Sea get their strength from their trade and their coin, not from their lands and the amount of people they have in service to them. They need fleets to keep their merchants safe, then they need them if they want to attack another magister. Even if they've built a fleet from sellsails, trade cogs and pleasure barges, they can still make another magister back down.

Across the Narrow Sea, they had found another valuable trading partner in the Myrmen, who had played a vital part in the completion of the canal with their knowledge of engineering and
construction. Their great artisans bought great amounts of Northern lumber, turning oak trees and ironwoods a hundred years old into the most beautiful pieces of furniture in the known world, with a handful of their craftsmen even leaving Myr for whatever their reasons and buying passage across the Narrow Sea to start their lives anew in the North. The fact that they had chosen the North over any of the other parts of the Seven Kingdoms was a monument to the close friendship that existed between the North and Myr, as much a monument as the vast tracts of land the Myrmen had managed to claim in the Divided Lands, places where some of the lesser Free Cities had ceded their claims over the plots of land in favor of Myr, afraid to risk the ire of the "sleeping direwolf" across the Narrow Sea who had gained so much from a strong, prosperous Myr.

The swordsmiths and armorers of Tyrosh had lukewarm relations with the North, buying some bronze for decorating their works and for making bronze statues to decorate their manses and villas, even helping to forge the great locks that made the canal possible, but they still weren't as favored as Braavos, nowhere near so. I am not happy about the North trading with slavers, but the Braavosi are freemen, with goods from as far away as Asshai. The Iron Bank is honorable, they will never break a deal they make, but they can try to find a way out of them if they do not like the terms. They want me to come to Braavos to make a withdrawal on the account, that way they could lower the interest rate down to the same as everyone else's.

But not everyone across the Narrow Sea were on such good terms with his people. Lys had little to offer the North through trade, only poisons and other such evil things, nothing the North had much interest in aside from a few medicines for their masters to stock up on, but that alone hadn't made the North dislike them any more than they disliked any of the other Free Cities that the North had little trade with. It was the Lysene pirate Salladhor Saan who had, as he seemed to have the support of Lys. When Stannis Baratheon had gone to sea with the royal fleet to bring the pirate lord to justice, he had him cornered and trapped, only for him to flee into the Free City under the protection of the Lysene fleet, who formed up between Stannis and Salladhor's flagship, blocking his path. Stannis would not risk starting a war by trying to press forward, so he had no choice but to return to port, grinding his teeth all the way back to King's Landing.

His maester nodded in agreement. "It is always wise to learn from as many different places as we can, my lord. You can never know if one place was correct or not, I am certain he will teach even myself a few things about the Freehold and his people."

Eddard smiled at his maester. He had the task of teaching his children and his wards, a duty that he had done well and Eddard always listened to his council. He was a wise and intelligent man and Eddard thought that maybe one day, he might become the next Grand Maester. He has a link of Valyrain steel on his chain, for his study of magic and sorcery. It is the first I have ever seen.

"However," the maester continued, "I am concerned lady Adara. She has drank more moontea in the last year than most women do in their entire lives, more than any woman should. I am running out of the ingredients to make more, my lord, though I should have enough for the time being."

Eddard sighed, everyone knew Adara's habits well enough, but she listened to no one about it, not even her brother when he simply encouraged her to slow down and was worried she might end up mothering a bastard. "She has almost used up all of the tansy again, hasn't she?"

"No, my lord, it is the pennyroyal this time, I have only a third of a vial left. I have already sent for some more, but would you be willing to speak with her? She doesn't listen to anyone, even her brother and sister cannot persuade her to stop being so ravenous, but you might have better luck."

"She barely ever listens to me, but there is no harm in trying, I suppose." I doubt it will do any good.
I have tried talking to her about this before, but it has never worked. "Is there anything else?" he asked as they walked out of his private room and out onto the hall, the door locking itself behind him. On the floor above was the bedchamber he shared with his beloved wife and his solar, which was larger and better equipped for meetings with other lords and the everyday affairs of running such a vast land, on the fourth floor of the keep with only the skies and battlements overhead.

"I believe your third son has made a modest improvement, my lord," Luwin said, referring not to Rickon but to Bran. "He has made some progress on his High Valyrian and his sums, but I fear he isn't driven enough in his studies, he sees few reasons to learn his numbers when he dreams of being in the Kingsguard. But your eldest daughter is surprisingly well versed in her Valyrian."

"She must be practicing with Domeric."

"I believe so, my lord. She is certainly fluent in the language now, but she still needs some help on reading texts written in it. I plan to speak with Citizen Vaenyris about teaching her further, as all his texts are written in classic High Valyrian.

That will help her learn even more, she probably knows more High Valyrian than I do. I only know enough to get my point across, but some in the North still speak the Old Tongue of the First Men with skill. The Snowstarks pride themselves on it.

They headed through the hallways of Winterfell, where the servants were already hard at work keeping the castle tidy, quietly talking amongst themselves as they worked about all manners of things, such as prices in the market or idle gossip. Even on the coldest and quietest days in Winterfell, the castle was alive with a life and activity that he had never managed to find in the grim silence of the Eyrie, a desolate, empty place high in the sky, never a true home for him even with Robert at his side as another brother and Jon Arryn as another father. During those few times whenever he returned to Winterfell, whether it be for great feasts or name days, it made him realize how much he longed for his true home when he left the bustling, lively capital of the North and returned to the silence of the Eyrie. There was never a moment of quiet in the castle where he was born; even on a quiet night in the midst of winter, where it was too cold for many people to work, there was still the sound of water rushing the pipes inside the walls and beneath the floors, a quiet ambiance that was just another part of day today life in the castle. There was the sound of children laughing and playing their games together, the hammering and hewing of the masons, carpenters and smiths who toiled together to keep the great castle in perfect condition. The rare caws of the golden eagles that made their nests wherever they could find the room and the distant sounds of people in the city, going about their lives as they always did, haggling over prices, talking with friends and family, shouting out prices and goods, with not even a hint of the scores who were quietly praying inside the city's Godswoods. It was a place the Eyrie could never match, not in all the years he had spent there, so far from home as to feel like an exile. Even the Den in Winterfell was a louder place than even the great hall of the Eyrie, where on a loud day there was the sound of wind rattling the Moon Door and little more. The mountain had made the castle impregnable, nigh impossible to take by storm, but it had torn out the Eyrie's heart and soul, taking away all the things that a castle should be and making it so remote from the rest of the Vale as to be desolate and empty, a withered husk.

A familiar and friendly voice called out to him from a room on the side, a voice that made him smile to hear again.

"Ned!" The old Seastark admiral walked over, smiling. "I've been looking all over for you."

Rickard Seastark was a large man, with a short bushy grey beard and thinning hair, but he still looked every inch the great sailor and admiral he had always been since his youth, the same man
who told him and all the other boys and girls at Winterfell stories about the Free Cities and his travels around the known world, sneaking them treats of candied fruits and Volantene almonds - little almonds covered in sugar that came in every color imaginable - even when their own father thought it might be spoiling them. He was the uncle that Eddard had never had, with both Rickards being born in the same week, growing together as brothers at Winterfell alongside one another. Eddard knew that Rickard was like a grandfather to his children, doing to them what he had done to his generation; giving them treats whenever Eddard wasn't looking and telling them stories of distant lands and exotic creatures. I would never expect anything less of the old seawolf. Like most of those born from the Stark stock, he had a long face and the grey eyes of their line, far wiser than they had been when Eddard had still been a young boy, but they still had the same determination and the same kindness they had so many years ago. He made no real attempt to dress well, but he truly looked the part of an admiral, wearing a blue and green doublet - that had a few pockets sewn in for whatever reason - with a good pair of breeches and hard wearing leather boots and gloves, his grey hair only added to the look of him being a seasoned commander.

"Rickard," he smiled as he extended a hand towards his old friend, "Good to see you again. What brings you so far from the sea?"

Rickard laughed as they shook hands. "Is it that strange for me to be on dry land?" He laughed again. "The Alayne is in the drydocks, they're careening the hull, putting on a fresh coat of tar and replacing some old timbers."

Gods, he still has that ship? He was given that command when my father was the same age as Robb.

The Alayne was a true warship, a galley of two decks built years ago from oak and ironwood, a Northern creation with a few ideas taken from Braavosi and Volantene galleys to create a ship with a single purpose. Scores of scorpions bristled the decks, with spare parts kept in the holds below alongside a trained crew of carpenters who could mend any damage the ship took, whether it was caused by storm or battle. At the very front of the ship, with a fierce look on her face and her blade pointing into the distance was a silver figurehead of Alayne Stark herself, the mother of the entire Seastark line, a woman who had left a legacy of life at sea to her children that they had kept alive long after she passed away. She had been one of the greatest admirals in the world in her day, putting a fear of the grey direwolf into the hearts of pirates and raiders, even being given lands of her own to raise a port on the North's eastern shores, the Wolvesport and founding her own branch of the Stark family years ago. But the Alayne was little like the ship it had been built as nearly fifty years ago. A half deck had been added, making her a few inches bigger than the Darkstark's flagship, the Golden Wolf, but that was only the start of the changes Rickard had made to the ship. A stronger and heftier ram had been put at the front, raising the ship's silver figurehead and namesake a little higher...after they replaced lady Alayne's silver forearm and blade. The ship had been overbuilt through refit after refit, but it was now the oldest ship in the North's fleets and the proudest, too, with a long history of battles that few other ships could have ever sailed away from, tales of luck and triumph in the face of grim odds, starting from the Battle of the Stepstones during the War of the Ninepenny kings, the same battle where Rickard's father was slain after his own command had been set ablaze after being rammed by a fireship and lost with all hands.

But nowadays, it seemed the venerable warship was starting to spend more and more of her time in port for repairs that only grew longer and more expensive with every passing year.

"Rickard, it might be a good idea to take a new command."

Rickard's friendly smile faded to a more serious scowl. "Aye, the Alayne might be old, but she
is mine. I can handle her better than any other ship, and gods, I love the old girl more than I love my
wife..." He sighed, then looked Eddard right in the eye as he added with all seriousness, "She was
my first command and gods willing, she'll be my last."

Eddard looked back at him for a moment before giving the old admiral a solemn nod of respect. "If
that is what you wish, admiral. But if you ever change your mind, come to me. I will pay for it from
the coffers of Winterfell myself."

Rickard started smiling again, the same smile he had when Eddard and his elder brother had first met
him, before Lyanna had even been weaned. "A generous offer, my lord...but it is one I must decline.
I'll sail with Alayne even if I have to put new timbers in her bottom myself. But that's not what I
came here to speak with you about."

The admiral reached into one of the pockets he had added onto his doublet and pulled out a piece of
parchment, unfolding it carefully before passing it to Eddard, who looked at the paper curious as to
what could cause the admiral to come so far in land to speak with him.

It was a charcoal drawing, a map of the Stepstones, with a path leading to them from further up the
Narrow Sea...and in the center of the image were a small group of islands inside a circle.

"I took another pirate ship a few weeks ago. They were a long way from home, raiding the trade
lanes between Myr and Pentos it would seem," said Rickard with a growing smile. "They were on
their own and after I put a few scorpion bolts in their hull and torched their sails, they struck their
colors and let themselves be boarded without a fight...but the captain, he tried to burn that map along
with a dozen others and it cost him a hand."

"You know the location of their home port, then?"

"I believe so, my lord...but there is more. I had seen his ship before, sailing alongside a war galley of
three hundred oars, each a different color."

Eddard looked at the admiral again, asking him to say more without uttering a single word.

"There's only one pirate galley with that many oars with that many colors. The Valyrian. Salladhor
Saan is the greatest threat to our merchantmen, my lord. They call him the "Prince of the Narrow
Sea", but if you give me leave to attack his lair in the Stepstones...I'll make his reign a short one, aye,
and tow the Valyrian back as a prize, too."

He could see the fire in the old admiral's eyes, the desire to bring down the infamous pirate lord once
and for all by attacking his lair, a chance to catch him in port and bring him to justice.

I know of Salladhor Saan. He is a pirate lord, the worst in the world. Lys gives him harbor and
refuge whenever we try to hunt his fleet down at sea, but if we catch him in his own lair while he is
unloading his plundered goods, we might have a chance to put an end to him once and for all.

Eddard nodded. "Take as many ships as you need to put an end to his attacks, once and for all."

Rickard grinned as the three continued to a stairwell, and the admiral started listing what he would
need. "I will need eight galleys and twelve holks, all of them packed with seawolves and twenty five
thousand gold dragons to pay for sell sails, mercenaries and information."

He knows exactly what he needs to win. Saan has a strong fleet, but some of his ships are trading
"I will make sure you have what you asked for, after I hold court. Once you have put to sea, go to
King's Landing and ask the Master of Ships if he can loan any of his ships to help."

"A wise idea, my lord," added his maester. "The Fury has three hundred oars and should be an equal
match for the Valyrian, if the pirate manages to put his fleets to sea. He shouldn't be underestimated,
the Saan's have been pirate lords for centuries."

"Hmmm..." the Seastark admiral nodded. "You cannot bring too many ships to a battle. I'll ask him,
but Stannis is like iron, he'll only go if the king tells him to...but if there's anything the Stag likes, it's
a fight."

Robert might even join him in person, if he gets the chance. He always loved a good fight...like the
one he had at Harrenhal when he fought against Arthur Dayne in the melee tournament.

He smiled at the warm memory, where Robert had proudly strode into the melee, half a man and half
a god as he took out a dozen men in the seven sided tournament, till in the end it was only he and
Arthur Dayne left standing. They had went at one another for over an hour till the great stag threw
his weapon to the side and leapt at the Sword of the Morning and tackled him to the ground,
unsheathing a blunt dagger as the two crashed against the ground in a heap. Dawn slipped from
Arthur's grasp as the two men fought against one another tooth and nail, wrestling and hammering at
one another with their fists and legs, but Robert was taller and stronger than the Sword of the
Morning half his age, too strong for Arthur to hold at bay forever. He had no choice but to yield the
fight when Robert had his dagger in hand and sat on top of him, holding him down, but he limped
away from the fight with three cracked ribs, holding his family's ancestral weapon as he walked off
the field without asking for any help.

"I will send for Lord Darkstark to bring a few of his ships around, too."

Rickard sighed in annoyance. "I would rather not have him there, my lord."

"How come? Having his ships there fighting alongside yours would ensure that we would never lose
the battle."

"He's a proud cunt," admitted the admiral bluntly. "That wife of his didn't help him with her
Lannister pride. We've never gotten along, my lord. He's a fine admiral and a good lord to his
people, but the bad part is he knows it. He was so proud of himself for having the largest ship in the
North, that Golden Wolf of his, it cost him so much to have built, but when I refitted Alayne and
made it a foot longer and a bit higher..." The admiral laughed lowly. "That made him angry."

Eddard shook his head and sighed to himself. They might hate each other, but they can do nothing
against one another, they are kin with one another. Besides, while they might be rivals, their families
are not.

They walked down the stairs of the castle slowly, talking supplies and logistics, how the attack
against the lair of the pirate lord would take place, then opened the door and stepped out of the
stairwell and into the passageway behind the great hall, where he could already hear the sounds of
his courtiers talking amongst themselves within, planning out their proposals and forming alliances
and deals to give them more weight when trying to influence him. Controlling the North was far
more complicated than any lordship in the south, simply because of how many wards he had; they
were not just at Winterfell to learn and to become friends with one another, but to also represent the interests of their families without having to ride all the way from their holds, a journey on the road that could take up to a fortnight even with good weather. It meant that every decision he made could be weighed upon by people from each of the great noble houses of the North, even if they were only minor issues of little importance to most of the North. He was already dressed for the formal occasion, knowing that he was to hold court today, but he took a moment to inspect himself, to make sure that he was dressed perfectly - a lot could be learnt just from the look a man, his father had always told him - and after adjusting his thick grey doublet ever-so-slightly, he stepped through the doors and into the great hall.

Everyone in the hall fell silent as he stepped inside, taking their places in neat rows with the people who shared their issues. *The battle lines are drawn.* His footsteps echoed off the walls and rafters as he ascended the dais and took his place upon the throne in the center, looking down from high above on the gathered lords and ladies of his court, familiar faces all of them, people he knew well and knew how they would act. *Ruling the North is a little different than what Jon Arryn tried to teach me. There is a balance of power between my vassals and I, and they work together to voice their objections so they have more influence in the court. It requires a gentle touch.*

"Let us begin," he said firmly and loudly with his lordly voice, the sound being carried to the furthest reaches of the room. Robb and Jon stepped into the hall at the sound of his voice, Robb taking a position upon the dais on a lesser seat besides his father, so that he would learn how to run the court in his own right for the future. His eyes went over the gathered crowds, stopping when he saw Alys...and then he smiled at her, a smile that made her blush before returning one of her own.

*Young love. It was bound to happen sooner or later, he cannot be five and ten forever, he will marry and have sons and daughters of his own, soon.*

Then Robb continued looking through the crowds after a moment and locked his gaze with Wylla Manderly, who smiled back at him with a faint rosy blush of her own.

...*but he is still a boy for now.*

It was clear that as Robb grew he started acting more and more like Eddard's own elder brother. He led the Wolves of Winterfell, all of them deferring to him without so much as a single question otherwise when he told them what to do. It would make him an excellent leader whenever the time came, especially if most of the heirs of the North were used to listening to his commands, but he certainly had a fondness for the ladies of the court that went perhaps a little beyond just being polite...but that was the usual for a boy his age. *Truly. I was the same when I went to Harrenhal for the tourney and saw Ashara Dayne and Alyssa Whent...* gods, the ideas a young man can come up with. *So long as he does not do something foolish like get both of them with child, there is no harm in him having feelings for them.* His eyes went to Jon, who had taken a place in the crowds beneath the dais - not because he was a bastard, but because only the lord, the heir and the lady of Winterfell could sit on the dais, so neither Bran or Sansa could sit there - and he watched Robb's glances and for a moment it looked like he would laugh. Jon was friendly, a little teasing sometimes, certainly quick witted, but all that only made him more like Benjen, the way he had been before he went to the Wall anyway. He had gone because it had been his dream to take up the black, even before he heard the recruiter at Harrenhal. Eddard had offered him lands in the North, the same lands that would have been his had Brandon become lord, but Benjen had turned them down, politely declining the maidens who were interested in him and then went north to the Night's Watch.

Then there was Arya, who was his younger sister come again, in body and personality. She looked the same as his sister had at her age, the same wild grey eyes, the same messy brown hair, the same
long face and though she might not have looked beautiful yet, she would be one of the most beautiful women in the realm when she was older, there was never a question about it in his eyes. Everyone who had known Lyanna when she was the same age as Arya knew it, too, how they both had the same long face before they grew into their beauty. He had never been able to say no to Lyanna and now it was just the same with Arya, so he let her have free reign to do whatever she willed, so long as she was safe. If she learns how to fight from Dacey Mormont, all the better. Catelyn might think wearing leathers and knowing how to fight is not something a lady should do, and even in the North it is uncommon, but I will not stop her from doing what she wants to do. The Mormont women are fine warriors, as brave and as honorable as any man. If that is what Arya wants to be...then I am happy to let her be that way. She is my daughter and I will love her however she acts.

His lady wife stepped into the room and took her place on the dais besides him, sitting in a wooden throne of her own besides his as she shared a formal smile with her husband and nothing more, to keep up the lordly appearances and expectations of the court. They had learnt so much from each other since they had been married; she had learnt the realities of the North, what were myths and what were the truths, but the same had happened in reverse, too, with her teaching him much about a normal life in the south, something he hadn't properly experienced, even as a ward in the Eyrie. But the Eyrie is not a normal place, even in the South. She had been utterly lost in her first few years in the North, a Southron woman lost in the North's capital city, surrounded by strange people and strange customs. She had been taught so much about the North, but most of it was either half-truths, mistakes or outright made up. She had stayed inside the keep for nearly their first year of marriage, rarely letting the newborn Robb out of her arms, yet alone her sight. She had learnt in her youth that there were a few cities in the North, yes, but she hadn't known that they were anywhere near as large as they actually were: she thought Winterfell was going to be closer to Gulltown in size, or maybe a large town that had been given the charter of a city for whatever reason, not the sprawling grand city that it actually turned out to be, where wargs practiced their arts openly and where it seemed to her that it snowed almost year round. Her uncle Brynden had visited the North and told her everything he could about it, but there was only so much that he could see in the time that he had spent in the North, but it had helped her all the same. Now, she was truly settled into her role as the Lady of Winterfell and what had been so shocking to her those many years ago had become just another part of her life, though he knew how hard she struggled with their children and the more extreme parts of Northern life...like the cadet branches. That is the hardest part for her, she had been taught by a septa for years how her children - boy or girl - would act and how she could get them to do what she wanted, but what works in the South might not work in the North.

Then Sansa walked in, openly holding hands with her beloved Domeric before letting go and standing beside him, perfectly accustomed to a life at the court of Winterfell. She was no fragile flower, she was a true lady of the North, a direwolf to the core, as hard and as beautiful as a sculpture carved from ice and with a demeanor that could only be described as regal. She had no shortage of love for the people around her, perfectly polite and always caring, leading the ladies who had come to Winterfell by example when she could and always looking after her friends and those who came to her for advice. Sansa had been thrown into the task of looking after and leading the ladies who came to Winterfell as wards, but it had only made her stronger, even if it had caused her to grow up before her time. It was no wonder then that so many people tried to win her heart, but they had all failed to pry her from the one man she truly loved. She could be a queen if she wanted to, a mother to a king and to princes and princesses. But she would never want it, not if she has to marry someone other than her beloved Domeric.

After a few moments of organization, his herald introduced the first person - and thus issue - of the day. Ravens flew back and forth from Winterfell often, but even more often were messengers from the great lordships of the North, bringing messages to the people they had at Winterfell, telling them about the happenings of their homelands...and more importantly, telling them how they could help
their home and what to suggest whenever he held court.

"The honorable Tygett Darkstark, speaking on behalf of his lord-father Beron Darkstark, Lord of the Darkport."

The young noblemen stepped away from where his sisters were and stood before the dais. He was seven and ten years old, but it wouldn't be long before his next name day and he was already a man grown in his own right. Tygett was not as good an admiral as the other men of his family, but he had his namesake's skill at arms and always enjoyed some friendly practice with the other boys, never turning down a challenge. He was as brave as any wolf or lion and he was only ever truly alive when in the company of his friends, never liking to be left on his own for too long. Like a vein of gold buried deep in the earth, he had a few streaks of his mother's golden blonde in his otherwise Stark brown hair, with a drop of green in his grey eyes. He tried hard to keep his sister's out of trouble, especially Adara, but she was an uphill battle and Lyanne never went into any situation that could result in something bad happening in the first place. He was dressed from head to heel in the black and orange of his house, with the Lannister lion that was quartered with the orange direwolf above his heart in the same color as the rest.

"My lord," he said with a formal bow, "My father has come up with an idea that will make our fleets invincible."

He is saying the words his father wrote for him on the letter.

Tygett smiled to the crowd, who whispered amongst themselves, wondering what his father's plan was and even Rickard Seastark's interest was peaked.

"As you all know, the wood of a wierwood tree never rots. Not even a dragon can burn it, Harrenhal proved that, and as it ages it grows harder and stronger, not weaker, as it starts to turn into something as hard as iron. My father believes that we should plant a thousand wierwood trees, and in a century's time they will be large enough to be used to construct a fleet of ships that could never burn and could serve in our fleets forever."

"I like the idea of unsinkable ships as much as you do, lad," spoke the admiral in reply, "But wierwood trees are sacred. You can't just cut them down and make them into ships, else we'll be as vile as Black Harren...and we all know what happened to him."

"I'm afraid that is where you're wrong, admiral. Heart trees are sacred, my father and I would never think of damaging one, but not every wierwood tree is a heart tree. These trees would be grown solely to be made into hulls and timbers and would never have a face."

"Have you asked the Green Men about this?" asked Eddard. "I will not allow any wierwoods to be cut down, not without their permission for each and every one. If the choice is to have a fleet of powerful warships, or to commit such an atrocity and damn ourselves, then it is no choice at all."

Before Tygett could reply, Dacey Mormont spoke, arms crossed. "The Andals cut down most of the wierwoods in the South, using them to make bows and shields and so on...but you never hear of any wierwood ships in the stories. The squids don't have any of them either and if there was anyone who would want unbreakable ships, it would be them."

Maester Luwin replied, "It could be that they did exist long ago and have since been lost, an unbreakable ship is one that can still sink in a storm, should water get inside and flood the holds, or they could have been broken up and turned into other things when there was no longer a need for
them at the time." The maester paused before continuing. "However, I have never read of any wierwood ships in my books, or been told of them by any of my tutors at the Citadel."

"My kin go on hunts north of the Wall when they can, hunting shadowcats, mammoths and elks, too," added Donnel Snowstark. "The wildlings use bows and spears made from wierwood, and the Green Men go up there and meet them in peace. Let me send a message to my family for the next time they go there, my lord. Let them find a wierwood without a face and cut off one of its branches, then they can give it to the shipwrights and see if they can make part of it float."

"You can't build a ship with one branch," said Rickard. "Just throw a piece of it into the water and see if it floats. If it doesn't, then you can't build a ship out of it." He smiled at the court, then looked to his liege lord. "It works with rocks, I don't see why it wouldn't work for a small piece of wierwood."

"We will not wound a wierwood just to see if part of it floats, admiral. Donnel, send a message to your family, see if you cannot get them to barter for a wierwood bow or spear from the wildlings. That way, we can see how well it floats without having to harm the gods ourselves. Then if it floats, we will ask the Green Men if cutting down a wierwood tree without eyes is an affront to the gods...and only then will we start planting wierwoods, and only with their permission."

"That sounds reasonable, my lord." Tygett smiled. "I will tell my lord father as soon as I can."

He bowed again and walked to the side besides his sisters again, the three talking amongst themselves quietly as the herald introduced the next person to have something on the agenda.

"Lady Wylla Manderly, representing her father the honorable Lord Wyman Manderly, Lord of White Harbor."

She smiled at Eddard and then did a curtsy before speaking. "My lord, my father is one of your most loyal and capable bannermen and has helped keep pirates away from the canal in his duties as Warden of the White Knife. It was his fleet, alongside that of yours, admiral," she smiled at Rickard fondly, "That broke the blockade of Storm's End and allowed that man with his ship full of onions to start resupplying the castle."

Rickard smiled back at the young lady. "Oh, they didn't even try to fight us anyway. They broke off at the sight of our sails, there were just too many ships on our side for them to risk fighting."

"Indeed, and it is because of White Harbor's many shipyards that the North has such a powerful fleet as to route the Redwynes without a battle. It is with all that in mind that my father would humbly request for White Harbor to be given the status of a staple port. Many of the traders who come down the White Knife unload most of their goods at White Harbor anyway, so it won't make any real difference other than making it official."

_Making White Harbor a staple port will give the Manderlys a great amount of power. Anyone who sails down the White Knife would have no choice but to stay in White Harbor for a time to offer their goods for sale, probably at a price good for the merchants of the city, too._

Robb spoke quietly from besides him. "Father, I don't see any harm in strengthening our most loyal bannerman. If most of the traders already offload most of their goods there, then this seems like a simple choice."

"It is more complicated than you might think, Robb," he replied. "Being the Lord of Winterfell is not
just about balancing the power of our vassals, but also about looking after the needs of our people, great and small."

He turned back to Wylla and declared, "You will have your staple port privileges, but you will allow the traders of the White Knife to pay a small fee to your lord-father instead of putting their goods up for sale."

She smiled widely at Eddard...and of course, his son and heir. "Thank you, my lord, that is more than adequate. But there is another issue I have to raise." She sighed sadly as she began to plead to the court. "The White Knife, which marks our borders with house Waterman to the west...the river has shifted eastwards, and a number of villages stand on their side of the river! Those were our lands, but the Lord Waterman claims that since the river marks the border, they belong to him now!"

The sheer emotion in her voice, that she might burst into tears at a moments notice drove the lords and ladies of the court into an uproar. She had quickly learnt the ways of the court at Winterfell, the game of charters, wards, privileges and friends, but she had certainly become quite good at it, too.

"I'll defend the claims of house Manderly in a trial-by-arms if need be, my lady," offered Tygett Darkstark, standing straight and proud, Lyanne objecting quietly before sighing and looking to the ground in defeat.

"Aye, I will too, let Lord Waterman choose his weapons and champions!" echoed Torrhen Karstark, stepping forth.

Eddard Karstark took one glance at his brother and followed. "If Torr is in, so am I! Seven against seven!"

"As am I," spoke Robb from besides him with a steely resolve. "Jon, are you coming too?"

Before Jon could give his obvious answer, Wylla smiled at them all before saying with relief, "I thank all of you, but there's no need for bloodshed, so long as our good lord Stark makes Lord Waterman reconsider."

"There will be no killing over this matter. The borders between the lands of houses Waterman and Manderly will remain as they have always been and not follow the movement of the river, no matter what might have caused it to shift."

His voice made the entire court fall back to silence and let the brash young men who had stepped forth to defend her honor and the honor of her family - none of whom were older than twenty years - head back to where they were stood.

*I know the people inside the walls of Winterfell far better than anyone else, what choices they will make. Lord Waterman would back down if the Manderlys asked, but Wyman wants me to make a ruling to stop him from getting any ideas about making any claims at all.*

Wylla smiled at him again, grateful. "Thank you, my lord." She bowed and then stepped into the sides with the men who had been willing to fight for her, having accomplished everything she had set out to do at this meeting of the council.

"Next is the honorable Domeric Bolton, heir to the Dreadfort and representing the interests of his father, the honorable Lord Roose Bolton."
Domeric stepped forward dressed in the pink leathers of his family, with a pink cloak of satin cloth fastened by a screaming head of silver. The Boltons had long given up their old way of flaying their enemies, but had turned to butchering cows instead of people, producing the finest leatherworks in the entire Seven Kingdoms from the hides of furred cows, giving their once nightmarish words a new and innocent meaning. He bowed deeply before the throne before speaking.

"My lord, the lands of my parent house have blossomed ever since we set aside our differences and swore fealty to Winterfell. Never before has the land been so productive and peaceful, the people so wealthy and well fed, or the Dreadfort as strong as it is now. There has been nothing but peace and prosperity since we knelt, and though the relations between houses Bolton and Stark might not have always been as great as they could have been, they have always mended together and we have always answered the calls of Winterfell whenever they needed our swords."

"The Dreadfort is the third greatest city in the North, with only White Harbor and Winterfell ahead of it, but we lack the right to call it a proper city. Your father chose against giving us a proper city charter, no, he gave us a charter that called the Dreadfort a grand town rather than the small city it really is. We have few of the privileges that a true city should have, we cannot allow the creation of guilds, set our own tax rates inside the walls or even to give our own guards the privilege to carry out the law."

He sighed. "I humbly request on the behalf of my father that you rectify this...bizarre error, and give us the privileges to reflect our true position inside the North."

The words of the Bolton heir rekindled an old memory, from before his tenth nameday.

"My sons, the Boltons might complain about not having the right to give their own guards the right to pass sentences, but there is a reason for this."

"What is it?" asked his elder brother, all three of them sat before a hearth in his father's solar to keep warm as their mother gave birth in another room in the castle.

"You see, Brandon, the Boltons have rebelled against Winterfell before, even after swearing fealty, but we have always helped them back on their feet. If we didn't, no one would ever surrender to us. But keeping our men - men who have their first loyalty to Winterfell and to the Starks, not to the Boltons - in positions of command in the city watch of the Dreadfort means that they could...dismantle his household should he ever raise his banners against Winterfell again. All we would have to do then is to ride to the Dreadfort with our retainers to deliver justice. But Lord Bolton knows about these people, that they are loyal to Winterfell first and foremost...but it is a warning."

"As much a warning to him about the reach of Winterfell as the cadet branches near him, who are loyal to Winterfell. Blood is thicker than water, oh yes, and what is a direwolf without their pack to stand by their side? When the white winds blow and the days grow long, my sons, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives."

Father would know what to do. He always did.

"You will have your noble privileges, in recognition of the loyal service of your family over the recent years, as well as the growth of your lands. Let it be known that the Dreadfort is no longer a town, but a true city of the North, in the eyes of men and the law. You will have your guilds and your own right of taxation, but the right to give your guards the privilege to carry out death sentences will be held from you for the time being, till the people of the Dreadfort adjust to their new status as a
city, however long that might take."

Domeric smiled at him. "I am pleased to know that the father of my beloved is a reasonable man, my lord," he bowed once again, "I am sure my father will be happy at the splendid news."

He walked back to his place besides Sansa, holding hands with her again when they stood besides one another. They love one another...I see no reason to stop the Boltons from earning those rights, not when they are going to be one of our closest allies in the years to come. We might have quarreled with them a lot, but that was a long time ago. Now, they are a true part of the North and if Sansa still loves him when she comes of age, then I will welcome Domeric into my family as my goodson and his father as my goodbrother.

But how will I know when to give them the right of justice giving? That should be tied to the size of his city, but no one knows for certain the exact population of their city and holdings, or the North as a whole even. The last census is too old to help and the only one before that was done by Aegon the Conqueror when he stopped burning the realm and started running it.

The North had grown drastically since the days of Aegon the Conqueror, thanks to Torrhen Stark and his bastard brother finding the furred cows, but no one knew for certain how many people were in the North, they only had a rough idea based off of the amount of taxes the North took in each year. But everyone knew that Northern families were large, they had always been large, food was plentiful, but land was even more so. The North was as big as the rest of the Seven Kingdoms combined, but if it only had the population of the Reach - which his ledgers seemed to say - then there was still a vast amount of land for future growth. Centuries of peace and prosperity had made the North grow strong and it would have been even stronger had it not been for the Great Spring Sickness that had slaughtered the young and strong and the old and frail alike, with the strongest men feeling fine in the morning and being on their deathbed by the evening. The North's size and the cold had stopped it from spreading as easily as it could have, but some villages were utterly wiped out by the plague, like candles being snuffed out by a winter wind. The disease had made its way deep into the heartlands of the North, spreading from White Harbor, even reaching Winterfell where it killed a great many people, but the wargs of the city watch realized that their animals couldn't be affected by the spreading disease, so it fell to them to bury the dead with their bears and shovels.

It took the North years to recover from the pestilence, but it had recovered. The ledgers showed the drop of income in the areas most affected by the disease, where it had taken a deadly toll, but before long the North was growing once again at speed, like an avalanche of births...one that had continued to the present day and showed no sign of even beginning to slow, no, it was only growing faster and faster, more and more people having more and more children, filling in the empty spaces of the North and taking the place of those who had died in the plague, even the Lord of Winterfell, who had caught the disease and been slain by it. But after that, there had been a short and furious winter...of course, it hadn't been all that severe, since the granaries had been stocked for more people than were actually alive when winter came. Having such a winter and the plague had thrown off the last census even more: some of the towns it referred to as being bustling settlements simply didn't exist anymore, being wiped out in the plague or being abandoned because of the winter, and places where it said there were only villages and hamlets had turned into market towns after the refugees of the plague stricken settlements had arrived, or at least, those who had been able to live through the journey from one town to the next.

*Trying to use that census is pointless, now. I should have another made, count every man, woman and child in the North, how much land they own, how many animals they keep...but this has been a long summer and winter is coming. I will send my men out to count after the spring has arrived, as this summer could come to an end soon, so it would be best to wait, rather than risk having them*
travelling when the blizzards begin.

The courtly herald looked at his list...then he announced for all to hear, "My lords and ladies, there have been a number of noble births this past year. On behalf of their noble mothers and fathers, I introduce the following children to the court of Winterfell, so that they might be known."

He began listing off names and their houses, one by one. "The little Gerold Mormont, born only a few weeks ago in the waning days of the year two hundred ninety seven since Aegon's Conquest, the third son and fourth child of the honorable Lord Mormont, lord of Bear Island, and his lady wife Lynesse Hightower."

He must be named for the White Bull...a worthy and honorable name for a boy.

"Eddara Magnar, born in the first days of the year of two hundred ninety seven since Aegon's Conquest, first daughter and first child of the honorable and young Lord Artos Magnar, Lord of Skagos, and his lady wife Lyarra Crowl."

They have nothing but the blood of the First Men in their lineage.

"Eddard Flint, born half way through the year, first son and second child of the honorable Lord Robin Flint, Lord of Flint's Finger and his lady wife, Alayne Greystark."

"Eddard Greystark, born three moons ago in the year two hundred ninety seven Aegon's Conquest, first son and sixth child of Lord Brandon Greystark, Lord of Greystone and his lady wife Jeyne Manderly."

He saw the little lady Lyra look down at the ground sadly when she heard her father's title - or rather the lack there of - only six and already knowing what it meant. In the North, it was customary for every lord to first be addressed by calling them based on the standing of their honor, like a title...but since the Greystarks had risen against Winterfell so long ago, they were no longer allowed to be addressed as "the honorable" anymore, not till they redeemed their honor, something they tried day and night to do. By being seen in poor standing amongst the Lords of the North, it was a lot harder for them to get good marriages, their word was valued less highly and they had to pay so much more for the dowries of their maidens. They had been so eager to try and redeem themselves in the eyes of the Northern lords that Lord Brandon's elder brother - the original heir to Greystone - had ridden at his elder brother's side only to be slain in King's Landing, then the second brother of their line had died in the rebellion in the Battle of the Bells.

They broke the vows of fealty they swore in the eyes of gods and men and turned against their kin, slaying their own blood, but they have labored long and hard to wash out that crime. I would count them as one of Winterfell's most loyal supporters, but I cannot say if their crimes have been forgiven and their honor restored. It is up to the lords of the North whether they have been.

Jeyne Manderly is a good marriage for them, though. One of Ser Marlon Manderly's daughters. They are starting to be forgiven, at long last.

"Eddard Reed, born in the later half of the year of two hundred ninety seven since Aegon's Conquest, second son and third child of Lord Howland Reed, Lord of Greywater Watch and his lady wife Jyana Blackmyre."

...another Eddard.
"Eddard and his twin brother Eddrick Seastark, born four months before today in the year of two hundred ninety seven since Aegon's Conquest, first and second sons and second and third children of the honorable Beric Seastark, heir to the Wolvesport with his lady wife the fair Walda Frey."

"He married her for the dowry..." muttered Rickard quietly. "Stupid boy...you can get more gold, you can't get a new wife."

"And finally, Catelyn Glover, born on the very start of this year, of two hundred ninety eight since Aegon's Conquest, first daughter and second child of the honorable lord Robett Glover, Lord of Deepwood Motte and his lady wife Sybelle Locke."

His wife smiled. "It seems I have a namesake, my lord," she said as she smiled at Eddard. "Though not quite as many as you."

"It seems like half the boys in the North are named after me, my lady. I cannot see why, though. My father was a better lord than I, and my brother was raised for it."

"You cannot have done that poorly, husband, if so many people in the North are naming their sons for you." She gave him a smile he knew very, very well. "Perhaps if we have another child, another son...I will name him for you, too."

"Oh, my lord!" said the court's herald. "There's one more name, added by the Green Men it would seem."

"Ned, of the Stone Crows clan in the Vale, born sometime last year, the two hundred ninety seventh since Aegon's Conquest, a son of Shagga, who is the son of Dolf, chief of the Stone Crows...and...they're not sure who his mother is, my lord."

Eddard sighed. Not only did the clans in the Vale know who he was, calling him "the Ned" or "the Stark" like the clans of the North, but they were naming their sons after him, too. He knew that even the wildlings knew who he was, but that wasn't that surprising, they were close, separated only by the Wall. But the clans of the Vale were far away from the North, they probably didn't know who the King on the Iron Throne was, if they knew what the Iron Throne was at all. And yet they know my name. I suppose they must have learnt of it from the Green Men when they were tending to their wierwoods.

"Are there any more names?"

"No, my lord."

"Then I will bring today's session of court to a close, unless there are any other issues to be discussed?"

The court remained quiet, no one stepping forth or raising their voices to bring forth a new discussion, but talking amongst themselves all the same about the results of the few proposals and discussions of the day. There's nothing more to be done, but there are usually far more discussions than this. Finally, after he was sure no one was going to bring forth anything else, he finished court and then rose from his throne, being followed out of the great hall of Winterfell by his sons and daughters, leaving the rest of his household to go about their day in peace.

Then, when they were in the hallways of Winterfell again, he asked his eldest daughter, "Where's your sister?"
She's having a nap," Sansa replied. "Or at least, that's what Dacey said."

Robb and Jon talked amongst themselves before heading outside, with their sister following, leaving only Eddard and his lady wife in the halls. "Rickon is asleep too, Ned," she said with a smile that showed her obvious love for the youngest Stark. "He wanted to see you, too."

Eddard smiled back at his wife. Their children were more than just heirs and spares for Winterfell, or daughters to be married away. They were children that had sprang from a marriage of love and he loved each and every one of them, there never being a moment when he didn't. "I haven't been able to spend much time with him lately, not as much as I would like."

They headed to the steps, starting to ascend to the top floor where their rooms and his solar was. "He misses you a lot, Ned," his wife sighed.

He put an arm around her, able to let down the lordly look he kept in front of the court and in public. "Then there will be no court tomorrow. I will spend the entire day with my sons and daughters, all of them, especially Rickon."

*What is the point in being a lord if I cannot spend time with the ones I love?*

"The North is so different than the South," said his wife as they climbed the steps together. "I was taught by my septa that my husband would love our children, but...never as much as you love ours, or as much as you love me."

"Not all the lords of the North love their wives or their sons and daughters, but many of them do. Most meet the ladies of the North for the first time at Winterfell, when they're younger than Robb. It gives them time to bond with each other, even fall in love with one another before getting married. A marriage of love makes more children."

"I would hope so."

She gave him the smile again, and he knew full well what was on her mind.

He smiled back at her.

Then they started heading up the stairs a bit quicker.

"Oh, and Ned...what was that look Robb gave to Alys and Wylla?"

"Do you remember the tournament at Harrenhal?"

She slowed down her climb and nodded.

"Do you remember when I saw Ashara Dayne and Alyssa Whent? During the feast?"

She looked back at him curiously for a moment...then she laughed. "It was the same as the one Robb gave!"

"It is something a boy thinks about when they are at that age. He is seeing the ladies around him with a different look for the first time."
"He won't be a boy forever..." his wife accepted. "He'll marry and have sons and daughters of his own."

"Aye, he will, but there are still a few years before then, my wife. Brandon dreams of being in the Kingsguard, Sansa the Lady of the Dreadfort, Arya..."

"Ned...Arya is wild, she'll never be tamed, by any man." his wife sighed again. "I don't want to see her married off to someone she doesn't like."

"She doesn't have to marry, Catelyn. If she doesn't want to marry, to have sons and daughters of her own, she doesn't have to."

His wife looked at him sadly, a tear on her cheek. "But that is what being a lady is. Having children...looking after them and raising them...if she stays the way she is, no man will ever love her...She will never know what it feels like to hold her own sons and daughters in her arms, to hear them call her mother, to be loved."

He embraced his wife, wrapping his arms around her and holding her close. "Catelyn...my beloved wife...you never know what tomorrow might bring. Sansa wasn't much different when she was young, but she grew out of it," he comforted. "Arya will be one of the most beautiful women in the world when she comes of age, men will try long and hard to claim her hand."

"Maybe some prince will ride up on his horse and win her heart..."

He swallowed.

"Maybe, but we must love her, whatever she wants to make of her life."

She squeezed him, placing her head against his chest. "I sent a raven to the Eyrie, to my uncle. I hope he comes here, Ned. I...I don't know what to do with our children. They are just so...different than what I was raised to expect."

He smiled at her again, smiling for her, to lift her heart and mood. "I will hold a feast for him when he comes, for Lysa and her son too, if she comes along with him. There's no need to worry about our children, my wife. They love you just as much as you love them, even if they might not show it as often as they should."

"But they are so against what I was raised...all of them...except Sansa." She sighed. "Ned...is Sansa like me?"

Instantly he answered, "She is exactly the same as you. She talks like you, she walks like you...she dances and smiles and laughs like you. She acts like you, if you were from the North."

"How did I never see it, Ned? She is like me, the way I was when I was young, but I never realized...not till Lyanne told me."

"Sometimes we never see the things right in front of us, even if they are as obvious as the sun."

She smiled at him...and he swept her off her feet and into his arms. He had aged since the Rebellion, but he still had plenty of strength in him, even if part of his beard might have been starting to turn grey. She laughed in surprise as he carried up the steps, one at a time. "Ned! What if someone sees us?"
"There is no woman I have ever loved as much as you, Catelyn, and I am not afraid to let the people of Winterfell see it."

She smiled at him, holding onto him tightly as he ascended the steps. "If this is what being a woman of the North is like, to be loved so much...I never want to go south again, Ned. Winterfell is my home, even if it is nothing like Riverrun."

"Catelyn, do you think we will have another?"

"Another child?" She smiled at him again and nodded with a glance towards her middle. "I hope so, Ned. Our children might confuse me at times...but they have brought me nothing but happiness. I would like another, another boy or another girl, it doesn't matter which."

He smiled as he rose onto the floor where their bedchamber was. His arms ached from carrying her for so long, he was certainly not as strong as he used to be, but he refused to put her back onto her feet, not so close to her room. I will be damned if I cannot carry her from the ground floor to the bedchamber. I am not a greybeard just yet. He laughed as they came upon the first true obstacle.

A closed door. Catelyn held onto him even more tightly than before with one arm, reaching out with the other and barely managing to open it. He didn't put her down even as the ache in his arms grew worse and more painful, he carried her to the door of their bedchamber and had her open it, then carried her inside and finally lay her down upon their bed in the middle of the room. She had a room of her own, decorated to her own tastes, but they only ever shared one, ever since the earliest days of their marriage. Her auburn hair flowed freely over the bed as she looked back at him with her beautiful blue eyes, waving for him to come over as she began unfastening the laces of her dress. "We only have till dinner," he said.

She smiled back at him.

"A good thing beef takes a long time to cook, then."

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Chapter End Notes

The North is a lot more powerful, but with that power has come a lot of extra responsibilities for the Lord of Winterfell. Eddard Stark has to be able to handle sums and numbers, large ones, so that he can check the ledgers himself and ensure that the entire North is running smoothly and that he isn't being swindled by anyone deliberately cutting their tax payments low. It is something his father taught him, as the back and forth between Casterly Rock, Highgarden and Winterfell meant that it took a little longer for him to end up being sent to the Eyrie, as he really did believe he might have gone to one of the other two places. Oh, he still likes Robert and Jon Arryn, but he has known them for a little less time than in canon and spent more time with the rest of his kin, visiting for feasts, namedays and other special occasions like that, so Eddard himself has a little less of the Arryn values and more of the Stark ones, a little bit closer to the way they were. He's still the honorable Ned Stark, that's for sure, but he has an understanding of why somethings are the way they are, like why his father kept a tight
leash on control of the Dreadfort's watch, so that if Roose rebelled, he could have him killed or at least slow down his organization in time for Winterfell to march on them.

And having cadet branches all over the place serves as an excellent example of who could replace any rebelling lord.

With Winterfell being so much busier and more lively than ever before as the nerve center of a continent sized realm, there is a private room for the Lord of Winterfell, not his solar of course, but something quite similar, a place for him to retire to whenever he craves a little peace and quiet. Those books are the North's history as written by the Lords of Winterfell, not by the maesters, with a different point of view...and it was where his father came up with his plans. Eddard still doesn't know for certain what Rickard Stark was planning, even after all these years and after reading all his journals, but he has been trying to figure it out for years, trying to understand whatever Rickard had been planning to do.

And of course, the increased wealth of the North means that they've got much larger cash reserves than in canon, having several million in total. They're no where near as wealthy as the Westerlands - who themselves are quite a bit richer than in canon thanks to the canal - but they've got more stored away than the Reach in case of a long and costly winter. That comes from the money the Reach would spend on things like musicians, mummers and tournaments. Then across the sea, they have a large reserve with the Iron Bank, though the bankers have been trying to find a loophole to get out of the deal that had almost been forced on them by one of the Starks of old, but the only way they have out of it is if the Eddard removes some money from the account, something he has no desire to do, as each year a little bit more money from the Bank's loan deals goes back to the account and adding onto the emergency reserve of house Stark. The North doesn't keep the Faith, so they have no qualms about usury, not even considering it a moral problem whatsoever, and they've learnt a lot more about managing money from the merchants across the Narrow Sea. Of course, no one in Westeros knows what inflation is yet, but they know of interest and the like.

The North's relations with the Free Cities are rather good, especially with Braavos, Myr and Volantis, who benefit the most from a healthy, strong North. The help of the Free Cities was vital to the completion of the North's canal, as it basically brought Valyrian engineering to the project. We know the Valyrians of canon were good at engineering anyway, since they built things like the bridge at Volantis, not to mention the Black Walls. Their knowledge was needed to finish the project, but so was the metallurgy of Tyrosh, needed to forge the locks and other mechanisms necessary to actually bring the canal to life, with the wooden cranes taking the role of the giants, though they were less efficient than those massive men and women. However, not all of the Free Cities are friendly with the North; only the ones where the benefits of mutual trade outweigh the North's hatred towards slavers. With Myr and Volantis, that has definitely occurred, but with Lys...certainly not. They and the North are not friends, certainly not, but they're not looking to try and start a war they know they cannot win. Volantis and Myr not only wouldn't back them up, but would probably attack them at the side of the North as a land grab. They're walking a very fine line and they know it.
Viserys I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Pentos, the waning weeks of 297, AC.

Viserys looked out across the glistening red waters of the bay from the balcony, a gentle breeze coming in from the Narrow Sea to the manse of the man who had taken him and his sister in, the wealthy magister Illyrio Mopatis, who desired to see Viserys seated upon the Iron Throne. Though he obviously wants something in return for his hospitality, but I am a generous king...When I take back my throne, I will give him the cost of our stay a hundred times over. Ships glided across the lazy waters as they pulled into port, offloading goods from across the known world. Spices and herbs from the Summer Islands, paper from Yi Ti, furs and ivory from the North and gold from the Westerlands, all of it came to Pentos where many of the great magisters of the Narrow Sea made their residence, though many more went on to trade at Braavos instead, the city that had forced a bitter peace upon the Pentoshi. Still, Pentos was a powerful city, even if it had been eclipsed by Myr to the south, Braavos to the North or Volantis to the east. He looked across the waters to the west, dreaming of the lands that awaited beyond the horizon, Westeros, the Seven Kingdoms, the lands of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, a land of lords and ladies, knights and castles, kings and queens. It was his realm, even if it had been stolen from him by the Usurper, the damned stag who had murdered his brother and endorsed the slaughter of his kin, who had stolen what his ancestors had created with blood and fire centuries ago.

But more than that, he dreamed of home. The familiar stones and towers of the Red Keep, where the great throne of twisted steel forged together in the breath of a dragon, the Iron Throne, - his throne - stood tall and proud, the very symbol of what had been the greatest feat of his family; the welding of many realms, each strong and fierce in their own right into one realm with one king, just as the different blades had been melted into one seat, so had the different kingdoms of Westeros been made into one. He wished to hear his brother play his harp again, to have his father give him a sweet for getting all the names of the dragons right, to feel his mother's gentle hug. He wished to wake up from this nightmare and see them again, gathered at the table breaking their fast as things had been years ago. But I will never see them again. Rhaegar was slain upon the Trident...the royal army crushed...my father murdered by a traitor in his own guard...and mother...

He sighed sadly, remembering how cold she had been after the birth, the silence that had been broken only by his sister's cries for a mother she would never know.

I have done what you asked, mother. I have kept her safe, just as you made me promise. I will bring her home. She might not know what home is, she never knew the Red Keep...but I will have her at my side when I return to the Red Keep. She might be afraid of me at times, but I have to be stern, I have to be strong for her, to stop her from forgetting what we have to do and what we are.

The first few years after the war had been the hardest. His sweet loving mother had given birth to his little sister in the midst of a naval battle with the wolf's fleet, the Royal Navy fighting one last battle while outnumbered three to one to get their family to safety in Braavos, where their family kept their own manse, a place for them to retreat to or to stay whenever they were touring the Free City...but she had never lived to make it there. His father had sent them both to Dragonstone to stay safe, away from the tides of war, in case the worst should happen, but when the traitors rose and put their fleets to sea, the Tyrells switching sides after his gentle niece and her innocent baby brother had been
slaughtered in the capital, turning against those who had given them their titles in the first place three centuries before, they had no choice but to leave their ancestral fortress as quickly as possible, lest they be cornered and butchered just as the rest of their family had been after King's Landing fell to his father's most trusted friend. They had stayed in Braavos, protected by the last of his father's loyal and true men, till the Sealord of Braavos objected to their presence and demanded they leave, else he arrest them and give them over to the Seven Kingdoms so that they could face the Stag's judgement. They had no choice but to leave, with that band of loyal men, a dozen of them...and slowly but surely, they lost them, one at a time, whether deserting from his side for a pardon from across the Narrow Sea or to go soldiering on their own, or being slain defending them from the Usurper's bloodthirsty killers till in the end it was only himself and his sister, one step ahead of Robert Baratheon's knives, running from city to city, from magister to magister for hospitality. He spent what little coin he could scrounge together on food, always feeding her before he fed himself, making sure she was as comfortable and as happy as he could make her, just as he had promised Rhaella, even if it meant he went without food himself. He taught her everything he knew, teaching her how to read and write just as his maester had taught him years before, telling her about the history of their family and who she was.

teaching her everything he knew, taking the first watch as she slumbered besides him, vowing to keep her safe, just as he had promised their mother.

My father was a good king, mother told me so. He kept the peace in Westeros, he filled the coffers with gold and the people cheered his name...but our lords betrayed us and those who were meant to be our allies turned their backs against us. Why? Why did they abandon us when we needed them most?

He steeled himself. When he returned to Westeros, when the people rose up and the dragon banners flew proudly once again, he would wipe the court of King's Landing clean, remove the stain upon pride and glory of the Iron Throne that the Usurper had made...and then he would turn his eyes to those who had betrayed his family. We raised the Tyrells up high, but that only means they have further to fall. When I return, I will burn Highgarden to the ground and salt the fields around it as a warning to the rest of my lords as to what will happen to those who dare to defy their rightful ruler ever again. I will make the traitor lords suffer as I have, I will strip them of their lands and banish them into exile across the Narrow Sea, so they can learn what it is like to see everything one has ever loved taken from them! He longed to see justice done, to see the wrongs that they had committed against his family set right again, to bring his sister home to a place she could be safe and happy, where they could be safe and happy...but that only made what he had to do all the worse.

I am sorry, sweet sister...I will do what I must to take us home.

The man who had gave him more hospitality than he had known in years came over to his side, smiling. Illyrio was a large man in more than one way, tall and strong in his youth, now tall and as fat as a whale, wearing thick perfumes that tried in vain to make him smell more like a flower bush rather than the sweating heap of fat he really was. But he has a good heart, I am sure, if he is willing to help me and my sweet sister when no one else would. "My king," he addressed formally, "Looking towards your lands, I see?"

"I am. Thanks to you, I will be seeing them again soon," Viserys smiled at the magister, who was going to help him reclaim his birthright. "When I take back my throne, I will give you any reward you might want."

"My king, that is very generous of you! But I wish no more than for the glory of being your Master of Coin, so that I might serve a just and honest ruler. Seeing you upon the throne is a reward in its
own right, your grace."

He grinned at the magister. "Then you will get your reward, when I am crowned...how is my sweet sister? Does she know what we have planned?"

Illyrio nodded. "She does, my king...she knows what we have arranged. She is taking a bath, then she will dress in her gown for when the khal arrives later to see her for the first time, then a few hours later they will be wed at sunset. A Dothraki wedding is quite a sight, my king."

"I suppose it is, but a splendid sight doesn't give me a throne. Will he uphold his side of the deal?"

*I would never forgive myself if he didn't. I would have married my sister to him for nothing...forced her to live a life with those savages. When I come into my throne, I will have her taken from those beasts and brought to me again. I will keep her safe.*

"The Dothraki will uphold their side of the deal, at a time of their choosing. But rest assured, my king, you will have your army. Fifty thousand Dothraki screamers, enough men to take back your throne once the loyalists rise in your name. My contacts across the Narrow Sea tell me how they are already sewing the banners for your return, my lord, and though the stag might have their hour in the sun, it is the dragon that will win the day."

He smiled at his new found friend again, his largest supporter. "I look forward to having you on my Small Council when we cross, my friend. The Seven Kingdoms are like a festering wound, there is a rot that needs to be cut out...had my family done it sooner there would have never been a rebellion. I will need to start from the beginning, rip up the traitor lords and replace them with people more loyal and to do the same with the Small Council."

"I am sure that the Florents will rise for you, as they have always desired to take the Lord Paramountship of the Reach from the Tyrells. The Conningtons were a good loyal house during the Rebellion, they could be persuaded to take up the dragon banners once again, perhaps for Storm's End. The Vale too had loyalists...the Corbrays, for instance, and the Riverlands has many loyalist houses, all of which will be competing for your favor when we cross the sea and take back your throne. The Westerlands are mighty and powerful, but they are held together by fear of their liege lords, not love for them. All we must do is smash down their door and they will collapse upon themselves."

"And the North?" he asked. They had been the most dangerous member of the rebels, the driving force behind them...the very reason the rebels had managed to win the war in the first place. *My brother would have never kidnapped the Northern girl. They lied so that they could take the throne for themselves. I will skin those ravenous wolves to the last babe.*

Illyrio nodded slowly. "They are more dangerous than the others, powerful and unified behind Lord Stark. It will be hard to break them, but they cannot hope to stand against the Iron Throne alone, my king. They will have to be the last on your conquest, once you have cemented control over the rest of the Seven Kingdoms and have enough men and ships to defeat them...but I am confident that they will fall, if we attack after winter."

"When the North falls, I will break it up into smaller Lord Paramountships. It is too dangerous to allow one lord to control as much land as the rest of the realm combined, even if they are frozen wastes."

"It would be dangerous to underestimate the Northmen, my king," Illyrio warned. "Few thought they
would be able to field that many men at the start of the Usurper's treason against your family, but they had been proven otherwise when the gates of Moat Cailin opened and spilled forth seventy thousand men."

"You doubt that we might be able to defeat the North, then?"

"Never, my king," Illyrio smiled again, stroking his pronged and yellow beard. "They are merely the most dangerous foe in Westeros and should be treated as such."

Viserys smiled again...and nodded at the Magister's advice. "Then we will deal with them when the time comes."

He turned and headed back into his room inside the manse, taking a flagon of a sweet apricot wine and poured himself a cup. The golden wine sparkled in the growing light of the day and he glanced at his own reflection in the still surface. For a moment he was king, with his father's crown resting upon his head, but then Illyrio's footsteps made the wine shake ever so slightly and the image broke as quickly as it had come. Before long, I won't see this reflection in a cup. I will be seeing it in a mirror. He took a sip as Illyrio followed, till one of his servants came up to him and whispered into the magister's ear.

"If you excuse me, my king, I have some matters to attend to, regarding the wedding." He smiled and bowed politely before leaving Viserys on his own.

So, the prince headed further into the manse, deciding to explore the magister's home. It was a large and proud building, as great as a castle, with maybe thousands of servants and hundreds of Unsullied guards, who stood as still and as silent as the statues that adorned the halls and grounds. He walked out of the building where his apartment was kept and into the gardens...and on his way there, he heard the familiar clash of steel on steel, a sound that made his hairs stand on end and sent chills of unease through his body. But no one is here to hurt me or my sister...surely? The Unsullied would have stopped them before they could get close. Carefully, his hand went to the sword he kept fastened at his waist as he stepped into the gardens and saw two men in armor, knights in full plate, hammering and hacking at one another, a mock battle. One was in blue and white with a breastplate decorated by a golden eagle with a helmet shaped like the head of a bird, the other knight was in red and gold with a lion head helmet. The lion knight pressed the attack furiously, never slowing down his flurry of swings, never letting the eagle have a chance to breath till their blades locked against one another and the lion threw his weight forward and sent his opponent reeling backwards, tripping over a rock on the ground behind him and crashing against the ground.

And that was when he saw it, the smoky black steel of the weapon in the lion's hand. The two fighters took notice of his presence and the lion quickly threw his weapon from one hand to the other before sliding it into the weapon's scabbard and helping his friend up. "So, you must be the king," the lion said, looking him over curiously.

"Aye, that's him," added the eagle in reply. "Silver hair and violet eyes should be a bit of a giveaway, Tyg, if having a three headed dragon embroidered on his heart wasn't enough."

The other knight laughed, then clipped the other around the helm with the back of his gauntleted hand. The lion took his helmet off, holding it under his arm and letting his golden hair flow freely, looking back at the prince with emerald green eyes...but Viserys was most focused on the great tattoo of a lion he had on his left cheek, brilliantly detailed with a dozen different inks to make it look as real as any drawing. "I am Tygett Lannister, and yes, I was at the sacking of King's Landing, and no, I am not here to kill you."
"Very formal of you, Tyg. Hard to tell you're hightborn," teased the eagle as he raised his helm, revealing a face that was not quite as handsome as Tygett's, with cheeks and jaw covered in a brown bristle and dark grey eyes. "I'm Brandon of Blackpool." He reached out with his hand, and suddenly a golden eagle darted down and wrapped its talons around his steel vambrace. "And this is my bird. She doesn't have a name."

"Well, the last thing I want is for the king to think we are here to cut him down..." Tygett turned back to Viserys, drew his Valyrian steel blade and knelt, Brandon quickly following. "We are here to help you get back on your throne. For a price, of course."

"What do you want?" he asked as he walked over to the two impressive fighters. *I always have a use for more men, especially when they are as good as these two.*

"Casterly Rock," instantly answered Tygett Lannister.

"And I want nothing really in particular but plenty o' gold, pretty girls and huge stretches of land somewhere nice and warm."

Viserys blinked at the bluntness of the Northman's request. "You will both get what you ask for, if you help me take back my throne."

"Good enough for me," replied Tygett. "We will help get you on the Iron Throne, so long as we get our pay in the end."

"Doesn't your brother Tywin Lannister control the Rock?" he asked.

Brandon sighed as his friend glared at Viserys. "He does. But that doesn't mean I like him or love him as a brother should. I hate him. He wants me dead as much as I want him dead, he made that clear well enough after the war. Risking his daughter's future as queen, he said." He laughed. "He said if I ever go back to the Rock, I would die from a "sickness of the bowels."

"Aye, poison, there's no love between these brothers," added Brandon.

"He exiled me proper after that, so I went soldiering across the Narrow Sea. Killing is the only thing I know, so I went killing as a mercenary with the Golden Company, which is how I met Bran here."

"It, uh, didn't work out as planned," said Brandon with a sigh. "We fought in a battle against the Qohoriks, hacking our way through the Unsullied, you know how it is, anyway, the Dothraki showed up not long after, so we ended up in a three way battle, but the company captain ordered a retreat, make it so that the Unsullied and the Dothraki would kill each other instead of us. Well, me and Tygett had skipped a bit of the fighting part and went straight to the looting the dead."

"That is how I got this," Tygett raised his Valyrian steel blade, letting Viserys see the masterwork ivory grip and pommel. "Some Qohorik had it on him when he died...a waste of good steel if you ask me. Tywin would smile at me if he saw me come back to the Rock with this, might even let me back in and call me his brother again, but the only way I will be giving him this is by plunging it through his heart...the miracle of brotherly love. Anyway, we got separated from the rest of the company, so we left by ourselves and ended up getting captured by the Volantenes."

"Who we were fighting for, the bloody idiots didn't realize we were on their side till after they threw us in the fighting pits. Tygett had killed a dozen men before they gave him that tattoo...then they
realized that just *maybe* we were telling the truth when we said we were on their side. Oh, and Tygett owes me a thousand gold dragons, since I made a bet that we wouldn't get executed. Remember that, Tyg? How you promised to pay if we lived?"

"A Lannister always pays his debts," responded the lion knight. "I will pay you, when I have the Rock. I do not know how you intended to pay *me* if I won, but I am a man of my word. I will give you enough gold that you could be *buried* in it."

"Was that a threat?"

"Do I *look* like Tywin?"

"I wouldn't know, I never met him. Well, long story short, we stopped working with the company and starting doing small bits of mercenary work by ourselves, for magisters and merchants, killing rivals, pirates, other mercenaries..."

"Wives, on one or two occasions, husbands...a few too many times for my liking, actually. Brandon, remind me never to get married."

"Who would ever want to marry you, anyway?"

There was a clank as Tygett backhanded Brandon again.

"Anyway, eventually we got enough money to get some good armor and replace what we lost in the fighting pits, so here we are. Brandon here is a warg, a good scout too, not so much of a swordsman, since I just beat him with my *offhand.*"

"The sun was in my eyes."

*These men are utterly mad, but if even half of what they say is true...*

"Excuses. Anyway, we can't keep soldiering across the Narrow Sea. We both fought in the Rebellion, we're aging men. Brandon is in his late thirties, I am half way through my forties. It's time for us to go home, but...well, we need you, your grace. We cannot go home. He stands to get beheaded by the Lord of Winterfell, since he fought for the Tarlys and I would get killed by Tywin the moment I let down my guard, even if I gave him the sword."

And suddenly, he felt a small sense of kindred with the two knights. *They want to go home and take what is theirs, like I do.* He smiled and nodded at the both of them before replying. "I will take you both home with me and give you what is yours, when we cross the Narrow Sea to take back my throne."

"Then we are yours to command," Tygett smiled and walked over to him, sheathing his blade. "Now, I believe we have a wedding to attend to."

"Shouldn't we wait for the third one? The sellsword?" asked Brandon, taking a position besides Viserys, the two knights escorting their king.

"There is another of you? *Another fighter like these*..."

"There is, but I am not impressed by him. He spends most of his team drinking and fucking."
"Usually both at the same time. Never bothers with trying to practice with that ugly sword o' his."

Tygett sighed. "He will probably end up dead the first time we enter a fight. Still, he makes a good meat shield at the least, someone to block arrows with. I would rather let him get killed than scratch my armor, took ages to get the smith to make it just right."

Viserys smiled at his two escorts, and then they started through the gardens, so he asked the more about their travels as they headed to the dining hall for a meal. They must have been to all of the Free Cities, like I have with my sister. After they fled Braavos with their handful of escorts, they had gone south to Pentos and had their dream of retaking their homelands entertained by a few of the magisters before being thrown back out onto the streets after they had grown bored of hearing of their plight. Pentos was one that only maintained its independence by carefully balancing their friendships with the other powers that loomed around them, a dwarf surrounded by giants each seeking to gain the upper hand on one another. Braavos hoped to break the back of the slave trade once and for all while Myr was hungry for more lands and willing to pay a price of blood and steel for them, with Pentos caught in the middle between the two bickering powers, playing a careful balancing act to keep both sides content that they were not allied with the other, trying to avoid becoming a vassal to either of them all whilst trying to keep the peace between Myr and Braavos, knowing that the first battleground between the two would be Pentos itself. Tyrosh had sworn to remain neutral in the affairs of the continent, but had sealed a pact of defense with Lys to stave off the fleets and armies that Volantis had been gathering ever since they forced the Qohoriks to pay a great tribute of slaves, gold and goods, a peace that had impoverished the city and broke their power all while Volantis drained the city for ever last coin and made it nothing more than a puppet. Lorath was much the same but for Braavos instead; though they had fought no battles against the Braavosi, they danced to the Sealord's tune all the same.

Norvos and Pentos had no choice but to look to one another for protection, watching over one another and making the same moves to Myr and Braavos, trying to befriend the Volantenes or Tyrosh and Lys to act as a counterweight to Myr and Braavos, but only the former were interested and their terms to protect Pentos and Norvos from Braavos or Myr were little more than to recognize Volantis as being the true and rightful heir of the Freehold...and thus to surrender their independence and become subjects to Volantis. But Volantis had been the only Free City he and his sister hadn't visited, though perhaps he still would if something went wrong with the magister's scheme. Perhaps the Old Blood would be willing to help me reclaim my throne? My sister and I are descended from Old Valyria, just as they are...hmmm. Perhaps, when Westeros falls, I should invite the Old Blood to King's Landing and clean the court with them. I could replace the lords with them and we could reinstate the first night and remake Valyria anew after a few generations.

Suddenly, a voice called to him from inside the gardens. "My king," said a thin old man, dressed entirely in a green robe so long it trailed behind him as he walked, his sleeves so heavy they concealed his arms and only let his fingers show when they clutched at the gnarled wierwood staff he used to help him walk.

He looked at the man, confused. He had never seen one of them, before. The green man walked over slowly as he spoke. "Oh, do not mind my interruption, your grace. The magister is letting me look in his gardens to see if I could grow a wierwood here. He wants one so that he can boast of having the first wierwood in Essos."

Brandon went pale as the man looked towards him, neither of them saying a word before the old man turned his attention back to Viserys. "Ah, my king...looking forward to the wedding, I hope?"
"I am," he answered, even though he wanted to keep his sister safe and at his side, not give to some Dothraki horse fucker. "It will give me the army I need to take back my throne."

"But of course, my noble king. Once your sister is wed to the khal, you will have the army you need to take the Iron Throne for yourself. To think, after years of suffering and torment, of being hunted by the blades of the usurper...you finally have what you need to go home, or you will, in a few days time."

"Indeed," Viserys smiled regally. "It has been a long time coming, but I am finally ready to go home."

"Good, good...you never know what tomorrow might bring, good or bad, as I am so sure you have learnt by now."

The old man tapped the soil with his staff a few times, pushing the point into the soil and moving it around a little. "No, no, this will never do," the old man sighed, "I have been looking around the entire garden for the perfect soil. I wish you luck, but just remember a little advice from an old man, my young king...fate can make a mockery of the plans of all of us."

"Only the gods can control fate, and they have deigned to make this day possible," he replied.  

The old man laughed. "Indeed, indeed...but a man who might see the future and learn from the past can control the present and make his fate whatever he wills. You have suffered before, what is to say you will not suffer again?" The old man looked straight at him now, and in the shadow of his robe Viserys could see a pale, expressionless mask as pale as bone...a sight that chilled him to the core for whatever reason, the old man's voice growing darker and more solemn with every word. "Who is to say that this khal decides to simply take your sister and crown you with molten gold when you object? You have lived a long time now, my king, you should consider what might come next...and make plans, just in case things do not come out the way you hope. See what is coming before it comes, my king, and you will have your throne."

The man then cheerfully asked, "Now, I believe Illyrio said there was a pond around here. Have you seen it? My eyes are not as good as they once were, and a pond should have better soil."

Brandon stared at the green robed man with a mix of horror and awe as Tygett pointed down the garden. "I believe the pond is that way."

"Ah, thank you, very kind of you to help an old man." He turned and started down the garden's at his slow pace, leaving Viserys and the other three alone.

"There is something not right about that Green Man," spoke Brandon with a serious tone he hadn't had earlier. "I can't tell what it is."

Tygett laughed at his friend's discomfort. "Come now, Brandon, you are not afraid of an old man, are you? He seems like a kindly old man to me, probably only has a few years left."

_He reminds me of Aemon, whenever he came South to speak with Rhaegar...they are both wise men, even if they are old._

Brandon rubbed his eyes wearily before they continued on their way when they heard the clatter of horse shoes in the distance. He saw his sister for the first time since the morning, a magnificent
beauty in a gown of silver to compliment her silver hair and deep purple eyes as stunning as the
greatest of amethysts. She was a newly flowered maiden, three and ten name days old, but she was
more beautiful than any other woman in the world, he knew. She was to be my queen... Illyrio
walked from one of his manse's halls, smiling at the sight of her.

"Daeneys! Dany," Viserys called, drawing the attention of his sweet, timid little sister. "Are you
ready?"

His sister looked towards the ground, sadly.

"Dany, look at me," he growled.

She looked up at him, and he saw the rosiness around her eyes where she had been crying. Viserys
sighed. "You will have to look at the khal. Do not cry, sweet sister, else you might cost us our
chance to take the throne."

"...yes, brother..." she whimpered quietly.

They gathered at the entrance of the manse and waited in silence, waiting for the khal, him holding
his sister's hand to comfort her a little, but to remind her of what she had to do, and of who she was
doing it for. I have looked after her for years. This is all I ask for in return... a chance to get my
throne. My birthright.

Then with the thunderous clopping of galloping horses, the khal and his escorts appeared, a dozen
men lead by one, a strong muscular man with a long braid of dark hair that stretched down his back
and chimed with the sounds of bells. He looked at Daenerys, looking her over from the distance, his
little sister unwilling to meet his fiery gaze.

"How will we know if he likes her?" he asked the magister.

"If he doesn't, we will know about it, I assure you..."

Suddenly, the khal turned... and something went wrong.

His horse refused to follow, neighing angrily. The khal muttered a curse in his barbaric tongue as the
stallion fought against his control.

Then the horse threw him with all it's strength, sending the khal crashing to the ground to the shock
of his followers, but he landed with a smooth roll, utterly unharmed. The khal roared, bolting back to
his feet and ran at the horse from behind to throw himself back onto his back, to show his defiance of
his powerful steed's anger and to show his mastery of horses to the men following him.

The horse kicked.

There was the soft crunch of a crumpling skull and his sister wretched at the sight and sound as the
khal collapsed to the ground, his eyes dead and lifeless as his left temple turned a brilliant shade of
purple.

No, no nonononono that was not supposed to happen! That was never supposed to happen!

Brandon stood as silent as ice with his jaw agape at the sight as the horse spun round and kicked his
rider's limp body again before bolting off into the city, the khal's escorts, sworn to serve him till he
died and to die with him when that happened stared, frozen in shock at what had just happened in front of them.

Viserys grabbed his sister by the arm and took her back into the manse, taking her into his arms and embracing her.

"I...never saw that coming..." uttered the battle hardened Lannister. "I have fought Dothraki, killed Dothraki, on the battlefield and in the arena. I have never seen one thrown by their horse, in all my years in Essos. Never."

Brandon stayed oddly quiet and all eyes turned to him as he winced. "I've got a headache all of a sudden..." he rubbed his eyes again.

Tygett laughed at what his friend had accidentally said. "A headache, he says. Not as much as the khal, it seems."

Illyrio sighed. "That horse cost us years of planning."

Viserys didn't care about any of that, he only looked at his sister, wiping her tears away and holding her close to him. "Come on, Dany, don't cry. It was not your fault," he soothed. "We can find another."

"But I don't want to marry a Dothraki!" she complained, pulling back from him and looking into his own eyes with her tearful ones.

Her stared back at her and heard his mother's words again.

"Promise me, Viserys. Look after your sister. Promise me."

I...I cannot look after her if she is away with some lord...or a khal.

His heart sank as he realized what he had been about to do. He had promised to protect his sister, to keep her safe and to teach her who she was...and there he was, about to wed her to a Dothraki khal so that he might have a chance to claim his throne while condemning his sister to a life in the Dothraki Sea. ...what was I thinking? It is not worth giving her up, never, I will take back the throne with Daenerys at my side, as I promised! I promised mother, and I will do it!

"No more tears, Dany." He smiled. "You don't have to marry a Khal. I will marry you instead, so I might never lose you, my sweet sister." He smiled at her again, wiping her tears from her cheeks.

She stared at him in shock and Illyrio sighed.

"If you do that, it becomes much harder for you to take back your throne, my king," spoke the magister. "It would be best to see her married to someone else, someone with an army."

"No army is worth losing my Daenerys. I promised mother I would keep her safe."

Tygett and Brandon whispered to each other quietly, Viserys having no idea what they were talking of as he held his sister and hushed her. Daenerys calmed a little in Viserys embrace, comforted that he would not give her away to some savage, comforted that she would be stuck with someone she knew and not someone who could be so much worse. ...I might be cruel to her sometimes, but I do it for her own sake. She can never forget who we are, who I am...who she is.
Illyrio sighed again. "As you wish...my king."

Tygett said reassuringly to Daenerys and all the others, "Well, at least this way, there is still a wedding and the cooks haven't wasted their time."

He gestured for the others to leave and put an arm around his sister, walking with her through the gardens once she had stopped crying. "Are we really getting married, Viserys?" she asked with some fear...it was obviously caused by her being afraid of the pain that happens during the bedding, he knew.

"We are, my sweet sister. We will be married, and you will be my queen when we cross the Narrow Sea and take back the Iron Throne. We will have sons and daughters of our own, little dragons who will rule after us. You'll never have to worry about being taken from me again, or having to be married to a savage like the khal. Dany..." he kissed her on the cheek. "I will never hurt you as they might."

"But...will we really go home?" she asked.

"We will. It might take a little while longer than I had hoped...maybe it'll be our children who take back the throne, but we will try all the same, sweet sister."

She shied away from him when he tried to kiss her more passionately, looking at him with fear and concern. He frowned and held her tightly, forcing his tongue into her mouth whether she wanted it or not, just as his father did with his mother whenever he wanted to show how much he loved her. She will learn, in time what my queen and wife will have to do. She stopped trying to fight him after that, which made him smile after he broke it off and held hands with her, walking with her through the gardens.

"In the Red Keep, my lady wife," he said with a smile, even though she wasn't yet wed to him. "There is a garden as great as this one, with a heart tree of oak in the middle. Our brother used to play his harp there while reading, sometimes just playing it for his wife and his children." He laughed at the sweet memory. "I could never play, no matter how much he tried to teach me, but..." he took his sister's hands and looked at her fingers. "You could play it, if you wanted to. When you are my queen, and when we have the throne, you can do whatever you want to do and have whatever you want, sweet sister."

His sister looked at him, her attention caught. "I can have whatever I want?"

"Of course. You are a dragon, sweet sister, and you will be my queen." Mother always told me how father treated her well and how the servants and people of the Seven Kingdoms did her bidding just as they did his. I want a marriage as happy as theirs. "You can order the servants to do whatever you want them to do, even the lords if you want. All we have to do is get our homeland back first. You will rule at my side, like mother and father did."

"But we have to take Westeros back first," she said, catching on quickly. My sweet sister always had a sharp mind...she will be an excellent queen. "We will need help..."

"I have a few ideas, my sweet sister. Volantis might help us, so we will head there, once you and I are wed."

She nodded understandingly. He had always told her about the importance of preserving the purity
of their bloodline, she had known for many years that she would marry him anyway - the attempt to marry her to that khal, whatever his name had been, would have been breaking from everything he had taught her. *She seems more comfortable with marrying me, at least. Good.*

"Our mother always told me how our father listened to the things she had to say. Our marriage won't be any different, sweet sister. Tell me your opinions and I *will* listen."

"Your grace!" shouted Brandon. "It is time!"

He smiled at her and took her arm in arm as she thought, leading her to a sept inside the manse, one that Illyrio had built for any guests he had visiting from across the Narrow Sea, with proud statues of each of the Seven wrought from bronze, each standing as tall as any man or woman. Viserys had only one cloak with the Targaryen crest on it, the travelling cloak he always let his sister have, so when it came to swap cloaks he simply threw that one around her shoulders as they exchanged vows under Illyrio's gaze.

Then came the wedding feast. His new wife was reluctant to pick at the various Pentoshi dishes, nervous even, only going for things that he himself had, but he would not have that from the woman who would rule the Seven Kingdoms at his side. "Go on, my beloved wife, you can have whatever you want, even if I haven't chosen the same."

She looked at him. "Truly?"

He smiled and nodded. "Truly."

Daenerys smiled at him, a smile that made everything worthwhile, especially his choice to wed her. She became more confident in her choices, picking things that he himself wasn't interested in happily...and when she was happy, he was even more so. *See? I have done as you asked, mother. I have kept her safe and happy.* He let his guard down with a smile and allowed himself to enjoy the festivities that Illyrio had quickly arranged, a mummer's show and Brandon's incredible skills with his eagle, playing a game with the magister where he would throw things and Brandon would catch them before they could hit the ground, raising even Illyrio's disappointed spirits back to something more like his normal self. *He is inside the bird! Gods, if only I could do that...but with a dragon...I would love to be able to stretch my wings and take flight, to be a dragon in one body and a man in the other.* But his eyes stayed on his sister bride, smiling whenever she smiled and laughing whenever she did, happy that she was not as sad as she was earlier, that they were together at long last. Taking back the Seven Kingdoms could wait for a little while longer, if it meant keeping his sister this happy and safe.

But it couldn't wait forever. The dragon had to rise again from the ashes that had been sown. *And it will. So long as my sister and I still live, the dragon will never be slain."

"Aye, have I missed something interesting?" asked a man he didn't recognize as he stepped into the room.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Me? Bronn," the sellsword answered as he took a baked pear from one of the bowls on the table. "Here to help you get the throne back, for gold. I sell my sword, I don't give it away."

Tygett sighed at the mercenary. "You will get your spoils when the throne falls to our king and queen over there," he smiled at Viserys and Daenerys. "And speaking of our king and queen, a
wedding isn't complete without a bedding."

His sister retreated back to her nervous and timid self, but he took one look at her and said, "No, I will spare her the indignity of that tradition." Then he looked back to his lady wife, "But he is right, Dany, we have to retire for the night."

She looked at him...then nodded, dutifully, as she always had, weary of rousing his anger. If she is confident and strong to our people, but the way she is to me...I will have the best queen I could have ever wanted.

"One last thing, your grace. A gift, from myself, for when you reclaim the throne," said the magister, snapping his fingers. His servants walked in with a heavy and strong wooden chest. "...but I suppose it can wait for tomorrow morning, my good king. Have a good night."

He rose from the table and took her by the hand, sweeping her off her feat and carrying her through the halls. Their travels and the fights against their would-be killers had hardened his body and made him strong, certainly enough to carry Daenerys to their bedchamber. She smiled at him still, more relaxed now that he was letting her do as she wished, as any king would allow their queen. On the way there, he began to explain what would happen between the two of them when they got there, something that made her fall quiet with unease and fear...then when they arrived at their chambers, he placed her upon their bed...and left her, to get something.

"What are you looking for...husband?" she asked, still getting used to the word.

"The last thing our mother gave me..." He rummaged through his belonging, for the one thing he refused to sell, the one he never wanted to, the one he prayed to keep so that he could give it to her. At the bottom of his own bag, the one where he kept his spare sets of clothing for when they traveled, he felt his fingers touch the cold metal. Carefully, he took it out...and saw his sister's eyes widen at the sight of it.

"Never forget who you are, sweet sister...you're a dragon, a queen...my queen," he smiled as he walked over...and placed his mother's crown upon her head. "I might not have our father's crown just yet...but I will get it, in time. But this one is yours, Daenerys."

He smiled at her, she looked truly royal with the golden crown, everything a queen should be, gentle and loving, but confident and strong. It was a simple crown, a queen's crown, but it was a crown all the same, the only thing he had left of his mother, the only thing tying him to his old life across the Narrow Sea, his most treasured belonging. And it is hers now, as it should be.

"It is yours now, my wife."

She smiled. "Thank you...for everything you have done for me, brother, for keeping me safe, for telling me who I am...I would have never known who our mother or father was if you had never told me who we were."

"Who we are, my sister-wife. The throne will be ours yet, if we work for it." He began removing his clothes, all black and red and bought for him by Illyrio as a sign of their friendship. "We just need allies."

"We should..." his sister started before falling silent.

"Come now, sweet sister, say your mind."
"We need to find people who dislike the Usurper, then work with them to try and take the throne...the Greyjoys rose against him, didn't they, brother-husband?" His sister-wife slid beneath the covers of their bed, waiting for him to climb in with her, but she smiled at him all the same.

"Then we will try and speak with them, after we go to Volantis."

She nodded. *I should have been making use of her mind years ago...but now, with her as my queen...the throne will be ours before long, I am sure.*

Then she asked a question he hadn't expected. "Brother, what do you think is inside the chest Illyrio gave us?"

"Clothes, maybe? Gold or jewels?"

"...I think they're dragon eggs," she said as he climbed beneath the covers with her, pulling his wife besides him.

"We will find out tomorrow, my wife, but for now..." He smiled...and then he claimed her totally, making love to his sister-queen for the first time, hoping that they would make a child so as to secure the future of their line, even in exile.

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End of part 9!

Chapter End Notes

Well, where to start

This Viserys isn't quite as broken as the Viserys of canon. Because of the power of the North being so much higher and the North having an actual fleet capable of fighting the Targaryen royal fleet on the high seas, they evacuated the island and ferried them away into exile with a number of ships, leaving many men behind to defend Dragonstone as a distraction - the canon battle of Dragonstone and the reason why Stannis gets the island in this timeline. Now, because more people went into exile with Viserys and Daenerys, their financial situation wasn't quite as dire, so Viserys never had to sell the crown of his mother, even if he had to sell all the other things in the end.

So, he still has some of his marbles. Emphasis on some He is more like a young Aerys rather than Aerys after Duskendale, with a nice side to him that tries to do the best things he can for his sister, then a more nasty side that is more like the way he is in canon. He's got his ideas of a dream marriage from his mother, who we know tried to hide all his father's bad parts from Viserys as best as she could, something she succeeded in beyond all expectations - that's why Viserys thinks he is making such a wonderful queen by letting her have free roam and the like, since that's what Rhaella told him was happening, even though it wasn't. So, he is trying to recreate what he thinks was the marriage of his mother and father, even though what she told him was certainly not the truth.
We also see a little bit more about the relations of the rest of the Free Cities to one another; simply put, there is a game of great powers going on over there, feuding as they might be. Myr, Braavos and Volantis are the big three powers and they're starting to draw out borders and sphere's of influence among the Free Cities. Volantis has practically annexed Qohor and would like to get Norvos and Pentos, but Pentos is caught between Braavos and Myr, who also want the city. Lys and Tyrosh are protecting one another...and that's one of the reasons that no one has attacked Lys. Jon Arryn didn't want to get the Seven Kingdoms dragged into what could quickly become a massive war between the Free Cities. He has been more diplomatic about things, a few letters here and there, a sternly worded response and so on, with the threat of power being more useful than the actual deployment of it. We'll see more about that later on.

And of course, we see Tygett Lannister. Simply put, there is no love between him and his brother whatsoever. After the Tower of Joy, Tywin was certainly not happy, as a surviving Lyanna would have meant that there would be no way for Cersei to become queen without something happening to Lyanna first, a risky gamble. He doesn't like how Tygett is always so quick to defy him and has practically exiled him from the Westerlands, preferring to think of him as dead, but Tygett is not one to give up so easy and has been soldiering across the Narrow Sea, hungry for adventure and battle. He's far deadlier than he was then...and even got himself a Valyrian steel blade. He knows full well how much Tywin wants one, but he'll never give him it and has a desire to claim the Rock for himself, hence why he and his companion have ended up in the service of Viserys, hoping that the exile king can gather enough support to take them across the Narrow Sea.

Then there is a green man...and they have an agenda all of their own.
Benjen looked at the woods of the Haunted Forest from across the snow covered fields, every breath he took becoming a mist of white. Even after spending years in the service of the Night's Watch, since the end of Robert's Rebellion even, he had never gotten used to how much colder the Wall was than Winterfell - no one ever did. *The North is cold, but it might as well be Dorne when you are north of the Wall.* Here, in the coldest parts of Westeros outside the Land of Always Winter, snow and sleet and hail were more often than not, except for the warmest days of summer when the Wall would weep freezing tears that had made it wider at the bottom than it was at the top. He was the First Ranger of Castle Black, one of the highest ranking brothers in the entire watch as a trusted adviser to the Lord Commander himself, but he still liked to take command of some of the rangings personally so that he always remembered what it was like to be out in the snows...of course, everyone knew he would not be allowed to go on them ever again before long. The Lord Commander had made his plans known well enough to all the black brothers, everyone knew that it would be Benjen who would be the first to receive his own command beyond the protection of the Wall, a castle of his own that would project power deep into the haunted forest and would protect the free folk who had settled down under the protection of the Night's Watch from the true, savage wildling raiders.

The Lord Commander had given him a small retinue of men for his mission; three dozen rangers, two dozen builders and a handful of stewards, all to help him find a good site to start construction. It was far more than simply finding room for them to build, they had to find a location that was easy to defend from the wildlings, with a good supply of drinking water, fuel and food, all three of which could be sparse at different times of the year. A freshwater spring could freeze as hard as iron in winter, game would flee into the forests never to be seen again and even *finding* the Haunted Forest could be difficult in a winter's blizzard when one could barely see their hands, yet alone any trees to use as fuel to melt ice or to warm their halls and cook their meals. They needed open space, then, big enough to store the things they needed through Winter, on a well defended spot, with ready access to a supply of food, water and fuel. Stone blocks could be sent down the Milkwater from the Frostfangs on barges for use by the builders, but for most of the work they would need to use wood. *But we'll need to use stone for the walls, at least the lower half of them. The wildlings might not know how to work steel or how to build a trebuchet, but they know how to start fires.*

"Looks like there would be enough wood for fuel and building," said Waymar Royce as he pointed to some open space on the edge of the forest. "If we cut back the treeline, we would have a good field of view."

"Aye, and the forests would be out of things to hunt the moment winter arrives. Wouldn't need the wildlings to kill you," Benjen replied, "The lack of food would do it for them."

*He's a brave man and a fine sword, but he needs time to learn. He will make a fine ranger one day, maybe even First Ranger or Master-at-Arms.*
The Night's Watch had no shortage of recruits; the cities and towns of the North always gave the men who broke the law the option to take the black instead of whatever normal punishment they might have faced, with most of them deciding to go to the Wall rather than become a burden on their kin by losing a limb or to avoid feeling the cold bite of an executioner's blade, it mattered little to Benjen...once they swore their oaths, they were his brothers, regardless of whether the reasons they had to take the black were noble or otherwise. Waymar wore armor just like his father's, except that it was painted black in a way that drew attention to the protective runes and wards that had been etched by the Green Men onto the castle forged steel. He had been placed under Benjen's care in the hope that some of his experience would rub off on the young, brash recruit, but there were others too, people from all parts of Westeros, even if most of the recruits came from the North. There was a man from Skagos, who knew only a few words of the Common Tongue, but he was perhaps one of the best trackers in the Watch, if not in Westeros...and he spoke the Old Tongue of the First Men perfectly, always helpful when meeting with the few tribes of the free folk who only rarely met with the Watch. There were men who had been on the wrong side of the war when the dragon and the stag had clashed against one another, knights and men-at-arms loyal to the dragons who had taken the black after the war's end, but they were as rare as those who chose to come to the Wall willingly.

Many more of his brothers had humbler origins and were the criminals of the North, the thieves and pickpockets who had been caught stealing from the marketplaces, poachers and cattle raiders who stole livestock from the herds of their neighbors or hunted in the wrong woods, corrupt guardsmen who had closed their eyes to the crimes going on around them or even helped with them, even fraudsters and dodgy customs officials who tried to trick the common people of the North out of their wealth. They were the majority of the Night's Watch, but there were a handful of ice blooded murderers and rapists, but they never lasted long, not before they "fell" from the top of the Wall or had any other manner of "accident." It was one thing for someone to break the law out of their desperation, that many people at the Wall could understand, out of greed and anger even, but to hurt others needlessly? It crosses a line for most of my brothers. They were just normal men in their lives before coming to the Wall, with sons and daughters, wives, brothers and sisters...when they find out someone raped a girl who wasn't even flowered yet, they think of their family and friends before making them disappear into the snow.

He flexed his fingers, hearing the muffled sound of the gauntlets through his fur cap and direwolf bascinet. North of the Wall, plate armor was utterly impregnable, no weapon forged by the wildlings could breach a good hauberker, yet alone a full suit of plate like the one he was wearing. The black steel was as cold as the seven hells, but so long as he was wearing his thick layer of arming clothes beneath, he hardly felt any of the metal's cold caress, though on a cold enough night his armor would start misting whenever they lit a fire. But it could quickly get tiring, especially after a blizzard put down a fresh layer of snow for him to slog through. But if I have to trade a little comfort for being invincible, it is a simple choice to make. It is hard to be comfortable when you're dead. The lower ranked brothers besides him had simpler protection for the most part. The rangers wore hauberks and boiled leather with a a variety of helms, all equipment sent from the North as supplies for the Watch to use. The Night's Watch had hundreds of smiths of their own in the Gifts, who paid their taxes through providing weapons and armor for the black brothers, just as the farmers and herdsmen paid theirs by giving a small fraction of their harvest to the Watch so that the brothers were not as dependent on the North for food supplies, but there was only so much they could do, so the North provided a vast amount of arms for the Watch, spares and old weapons and armor, but still far better than what they could expect to get from the south...who often sent weapons and armor so rusty it was easier for the smiths to melt it down into raw iron and reforge the metal into horseshoes and nails than to try and make it battle worthy. They do it so they can clear out room in their armories and say they're helping us at the same time, but they really don't care for the Wall, or the Night's Watch, only for the prestige they get for giving us their scraps and boasting to their friends about it. Ned doesn't
do that. He has Mikken and all the other smiths make weapons and armor for us whenever they have the time.

If it wasn't for my family's help and that of the North, the Watch would have fallen long ago. It was dying when Aegon conquered Westeros, but since then we have grown stronger and more powerful every year, just as the North has.

We have as many swords as most armies, now.

"We need to find a stream, for food and water. It would be even better if we could find a lake, too."

"Wouldn't a lake freeze come winter?" asked Waymar, his face buried beneathed a layer of black furs and cloth that let only his eyes through.

"Only on the surface. The stewards can drill through the ice and get to the fish and water beneath, even in winter," answered Willam, one of his rangers, a thin man only a little older than Waymar who came from the streets of White Harbor, choosing to join the black brothers rather than starve any longer. He was not much of a swordsman, but the powerful crossbow he had slung across his back meant he never had to use a sword anyway. He was wearing a black coat of plate atop boiled leather and a kettle helm with a long coif, good armor for any man who would never be fighting a wildling raider up close, but all the same he had a buckler fastened to his forearm and a falchion at his hip, a weapon that was as useful at chopping through trees for firewood as it was at cleaving through men.

One of the builders, Brandon, stepped forward with a suggestion. "Might be best for us to go west, to the Milkwater."

"We don't have the equipment for us to go into the Frostfangs, it'd be madness for us to try," added Gared, another ranger on his last ranging before he would start to train the younger recruits. "There's shadowcats in those lands, aye, and wildlings and...other things."

Waymar laughed. "You're not scared of a few fairy tales, are you? The Others are long gone, and their ice spiders."

"No," Benjen added, "Gared is right. We don't have the supplies to go into the Frostfangs, but we wouldn't need to go all the way. If we go north-west of the Fist of the First Men and the Freefolk who live there, we have the Milkwater for food and drink, the Haunted Forest for lumber and the Frostfangs for stone. It is the perfect place for us to start work."

"Good place," chimed in the Skagosi suddenly, breaking his usual silence. Unlike the others who mostly wore chainmail, he was wearing a suit of steel scale mail over leather padded with cow fur and carried a halberd. "Go there? Yes?"

Benjen nodded and instantly the crafty, clever Skagosi set to work. He crouched down on the ground and scooped out a handful of snow to make a bowl in the ground, then poured some water from his flask into the hole, filling it half way. Then he reached into one of his pockets and plucked out a thin metal needle that he dropped onto the top of the water. It floated at the top, just barely, then the Skagosi shielded it from the winds with his hands...and it suddenly started to turn on its own, pointing into the distance all on its own. The Skagosi then plucked out the needle and scooped up more snow to put into his waterskin, then waved with his hands the directions, pointing into the heart of the blizzard before putting the metal needle back in his pocket. "That way be Wester, half-day-walk to biggest rock."
"What?" asked Waymar, confused as the Skagosi tracker turned and started walking in the direction he pointed, Benjen and the entire group following. "How in seven hells does he know that from a piece of metal?"

"The needle points north, Waymar. It's a wildling trick," Gared explained as the group started westwards. "They mightn't know much about working metal, but they know how to get it to point north. They can't find their way home without it, else they would get lost in a blizzard and freeze to death."

"The free folk are more clever than we give them credit for, Waymar," Benjen added. "We can learn a lot from them. If ships can start getting needles like those, they wouldn't need to wait for nightfall to see the Ice Dragon and find where they are."

Looking at the stars was one of the most important ways for a ship's crew to know where they were, and no group of stars were more important than the Ice Dragon. Travelling towards the eye of the Ice Dragon always took them northwards, so if they headed away from it they traveled south instead. Every sailor worth their salt on a ship could find the Ice Dragon at night and thus find out which way was north or south, but the best navigators could use it to find west and east, too, but the metal needles some of the wildling clans used to travel were even more valuable in that it meant anyone could find which way was north and in day, too. We have as much to learn from them as they have from us. He and the Lord Commander Jeor Mormont both agreed that it was best for them to try and befriend the people beyond the Wall with trade and a gentle touch, not to try and slaughter all of them whenever they dared to show themselves. Most of the free folk were normal men and women going about their lives as best as they could in the worst lands in Westeros, living, laughing and loving in the almost everlasting snow of the frozen north. Had the Wall been built further to the north, they would be just like the people in Winterfell. It was only chance that meant they were on the wrong side of it when Brandon finished building it. So the Night's Watch had befriended the free folk, letting them settle in the Haunted Forest, letting them live in peace and never once raising a weapon in anger against them, even coming to their aid whenever they were attacked by the true savages, the wildlings.

Most people think the free folk and the wildlings are the same, but they aren't. The free folk are normal people who only want to live their lives in peace and want no trouble. They trade with us and the North, giving us furs and ivory and other such things in exchange for food and things they cannot make themselves. They are good people, some even go on to live in Skagos so their grandsons can live in the North and the rest of Westeros. I trust them...but the wildlings are killers. They raid the free folk, slaughtering their men and raping their women, stealing everything they can use to attack the Wall...but it always ends the same. The wildling invasion crushed against the Wall, their king slain in battle and the entire host scattered across the land. I have no ill feelings for the free folk, but I have only hate for the damned wildlings. Thankfully, more of the wildlings are starting to see reason as time goes on, settling down themselves and giving up on trying to fight against us.

However, there was still one man holding them together. The King-beyond-the-Wall, Tormund Giantsbane. He tried to keep the wildlings held together to fight the Night's Watch and not each other or the free folk...but Mance Rayder, who was the commander of Westwatch-by-the-Bridge, believed he might be the last ever king of the wildlings should he be slain in an attack on the Wall, as far too many wildlings had settled down with the free folk to amass another invasion. Mance was a wildling babe himself, adopted by the Watch. Might've been they left him for dead, but we raised him as our own. He's a good man, and true, but he and the Lord Commander have been speaking a lot lately...I don't know why, but I have heard the rumors...
Few knew what Mance Rayder and the Lord Commander had been speaking about, but there were countless rumors. One was that the Old Bear had been readying Mance Rayder to take his place, which was certainly a possibility, as Mance Rayder was a natural leader, everyone knew that, though people also knew he took the oaths and traditions of the Night's Watch more as guidelines than actual rules to be followed. ...But maybe that is what he is talking about with the Lord Commander? A change to our oaths? I wouldn't put it past him to try and persuade the Lord Commander, especially if he has the backing of Qhorin Deathhand. The strangest rumor of all was that they had become lovers, though the first time he heard that idea it had made him laugh.

The South - the true south below the Neck - already think of us as an army of sword swallowers and manlovers. It doesn't help that they know we have steam baths just as the rest of the North, for rangers to warm up in after a long journey.

He sighed as they walked, keeping his visor down to keep the cold winds and snow out of his eyes as they walked, looking around for any sign of wildling raiders only to see more snow covered plains and even more snow coming down from the white skies above. The wildlings always wore white, blending into the snow as if they Others, almost impossible to see whenever they lay on the ground, with even the glimmer of metal looking like nothing more than fresh fallen snow. But we wear all black. They can see us, but we cannot see them. But no wildling is foolish enough to try and attack us in a blizzard, no one is. He kept flexing his fingers back and forth, trying to stop them from getting too stiff as they walked westwards through the snows in silence... till Waymar Royce walked up to him with questions in mind.

"When the Skagosi said we were going west, why did he call it wester?"

"He speaks the Old Tongue first and the Common one second," he explained as the new ranger walked at his side. "Skagos is two words put together. Os is land, Skag is stone. Wester, Ess, Nort and Sothor are the directions."

Waymar stared back at him in realization, having never heard even a few words of the Old Tongue before.

"Did you think it was the Valyrians or the Andals who named the lands?" Benjen laughed. "The First Men were here first, and we gave the land its name. West land, Wester Os. Westeros."

"Shouldn't that be the Westerlands, though?"

"You would think so, but from what I know, there wasn't really a part of Westeros called the Westerlands then. How do you draw the line between the Westerlands, the Reach and the Riverlands before there there is such a thing as any of them? When the Andals came and the Lannisters became strong enough to defeat their rivals, that is where the Westerlands came from, long after the new tongue had replaced the old."

The Royces are of the First Men... he even has runes on his armor, but he doesn't know a single word of the Old Tongue? "Haven't you ever been taught anything about the Old Tongue?"

I know enough to say a few things, but I let the Skagosi speak for me. He knows enough Common to understand what I am saying, but the Old Tongue was his first language and he is far better with it than I am, good enough to speak to any chiefs of the free folk we meet without offending them by accident...

"No, my maester never mentioned anything about it. But my father told me about Rickard Stark,
how he was encouraging him to teach us the language, how to read runes. He wanted us to embrace our roots more."

"That sounds like my father," Benjen laughed again at the memories that started to come forth, sweet times before the rebellion sundered their family. "He always liked families of the First Men who carried on their heritage and traditions. He called us all brothers."

_Father's dead now, as is Brandon and Lya, too...but they'll live on, so long as people remember their names and who they were._

Waymar laughed. "My father told me the same thing, I'm sure he learnt it from your own father. He said that we should act more like the First Men we are and not like the Andals in the rest of the Vale, that we need to _remember_ who we are. So, when I was offered a knighthood, I turned it down. The Old Gods have no knights, I won't stand a damned vigil all night in a sept just to be called ser. A ser killed the High King Robar, and Gregor Clegane is a ser too. He must have forgotten the part of the vow to protect the young and the innocent when he beheaded the Targaryen babe."

_Some say he was meant to deliver the child to Robert in person...but when he started crying, the Mountain got so mad he tore his head off with his bare hands. If half of what they say about him is true...I hope to never meet him. He is too much of an animal for the Wall._

Benjen had never been to King's Landing, he had been the Stark-in-Winterfell while his brother campaigned, leaving him with the responsibility of running the North and Winterfell at little more than the age of five and ten. Beautiful maidens sought his attention, as many thought that he would take a lordship in the North after the war was over, or if his brother was to fall in battle without first siring a son on his new wife, then it would make him the Lord of Winterfell. _Thankfully...it never happened. We won the war, though it was not much of a victory. We lost father, we lost Brandon and we lost Lya, too. Had I lost Ned, too, I would have put our fleets to sea and closed Moat Cailin forever...I would have made it so there was six kingdoms under the Iron Throne, not seven._ He had never had an interest in being a lord, yet alone being the King in the North, but he would have done it all the same if it meant keeping the North and all its people safe from the madness of the Iron Throne. He might have even accepted a lordship, once, his father had offered him a town of his choice anywhere in the North and Ned had maintained the offer after the Rebellion came to an end, but Benjen had learnt his true calling in life at Harrenhal, where the recruiter of the Night's Watch, Qhorin Deathhand himself, was regaling everyone with tales of his adventures and battles beyond the Wall and how he had slain Varamyr Fiveskins and his monstrous snow bear in an epic struggle, the battle that gave him his name, as he killed all of the wildling warg's skins one after another, like cutting off the fingers of a hand before felling the snow bear and climbing atop the dying creature to finish the warg in single combat.

_Even then the Night's Watch was packed with men, but few of them had any knowledge of even basic tactics or strategy, certainly not enough to properly command the scores of men who manned the Wall. But I knew when I was listening to him speak that this life was for me._

Qhorin's plan to find recruits at the tournament turned against him, however, as only a handful of noblemen went with him, with Benjen giving a promise to come as soon as he could, but nearly three dozen of the servants at Harrenhal went with him to the Wall, as the Night's Watch could never reject anyone who desired to take the black, regardless of how many people they had manning the Wall already. The criminals of the North continued to take the black, and that was only pouring fuel onto a raging fire; the Night's Watch could barely sustain their present numbers, but they were constantly increasing...and now all the castles of the Wall were full to the point that the builders were having to expand _every_ castle on the Wall with new barracks to house the new recruits, new smithies to forge...
more and more weapons and armor and that meant more warehouses to store all the resources, more halls and kitchens to feed them and more towers to watch over the castles as they grew, not to mention the builders who were working on his suggestion to put turntables beneath the catapults, scorpions and trebuchets on the top of the wall, so that they could be turned to fire at any attacking force with ease.

At least we have no shortage of manpower to do all these things...

"I would never accept a knighthood, either, no matter what came with it. There are a few good knights in the world, men like Ser Barristan Selmy, but there are many more of them who are nothing more than animals. Ser Gregor Clegane is only one of many, I'm sure," he replied to the Royce. *We have more in common than I might have thought.* "What is the point of having a title that means you should protect the weak and the innocent if so few knights follow the vows they swore?"

"That's why I never accepted the knighthood. My father was stunned silent when he saw me refuse," Waymar laughed before his words become solemn and stern. "But he was proud of me for doing so, I know it. I think he might even renounce his own knighthood and he prayed in the godswood before I came north to take the black."

"What made you volunteer, anyway? Not many from the South take the vows, we gain most of our strength from the North."

"I'm a third son. I had nothing to inherit, no lands, titles or gold of my own. I could have gone soldiering across the Narrow Sea, sign on with one of the mercenary companies, but the Night's Watch is a more honorable choice."

"You made the right choice. We have been needing more men who know how to command, how to lead other men into battle. We have thousands of brothers, but as brave as they are, only a handful of them know how to take charge of a dozen men going into battle."

The blizzard grew more furious and hurled more and more snow against them, the bitter cold winds screaming as they rushed across the lands with a fierce roar, a cold that made him wince even behind armor and cloth, every breath he took filling his chest with pain, like the stabbing of a hundred pinpricks. He opened his eyes against the winds...and saw for the briefest of moments the sun breaking through the thick clouds and shining against the snowflakes still falling, all of them glittering a brilliant white like the stars of the night sky as they drifted towards the ground, more beautiful than the finest of gemstones. *Gods... Then, as soon as it had come it was gone again, the warm sun retreating before the cold clouds, the light fading away back to a dull grey. He shifted as he looked back to his men, constantly wiggling his toes and fingers as he walked. Freezing to death was a slow and painless way to die, he knew, where it would feel as though his fingers and toes just felt as though they were never there at all, then his hands and feet, his arms and legs...and by the time it reached the chest it was always too late for help, even if they managed to bring him back to Castle Black to warm up, the maester and his stewards would have to take his arms and legs both, but what was the point of living when one could not run or walk or even crawl as a babe might, being nothing more than a chest and a head? No, they give them mercy, then, when their bodies have been so eaten by the cold. But so long as I can feel my fingers and toes...so long as I can feel them moving and aching, I know winter's hunger hasn't taken them just yet. These lands are more beautiful than anywhere else in Westeros, but they are deadly."

"Come on, we have to keep moving. No blizzard can keep this up for long, we don't want to be out in the open when the wildlings emerge from hiding."
If only we had some elk. The free folk use them to move things, so should we. A horse would be useless in this weather. They hadn't been given any horses for this ranging, there were far less of them than there were rangers, and Qhorin had been trying to track down one of the ice river clans for nearly a month, tiring out their best steeds in the chase, so they were in the Gift to rest; a tired horse north of the Wall would be a dead horse before long and any horse that died was very difficult to replace so the Watch had no choice but to be careful with them.

It is one thing for the lords of the North to give us weapons, armor and food, another for them to give us warhorses. The builders have plenty of cattle and oxen for their work and the free folk have elk to carry their burdens, but we have to make do with nothing for this journey. Our stewards and builders are carrying our supplies, so my rangers can focus on fighting.

In the distance, as the storm began to wither and die were more trees of the Haunted Forest. It would be much harder to spot them amongst the trees, but it was also all that easier for them to be ambushed if the wildlings were already in waiting for them. But it is safer in the woods than in the opening. A warg in an eagle could see us with ease, but in the trees it becomes much harder for them to find us. I would rather not get into a battle against them, not with so many builders and stewards here. My rangers could defeat half-a-hundred raiders without losing a man, but the stewards and builders aren't trained or armed for a battle, they would be slaughtered as soon as my men were busy fighting the wildlings. He sighed, his breath misting against the inside of the helmet. When they finally made it to the treeline, he breathed a sigh of relief - the tall sentinels, ironwoods and oaks were blocking most of the winds, giving his band of men a respite from their chilling bite, as well as making it much harder for them to be seen. Only a few more hours to go, and we will see if I was right. We will need to mark the spot on our maps so we can send out more men. We will probably need a hundred rangers to defend while five hundred builders set to work, with three hundred stewards to feed them.

He led the men onwards, through the thickest part of the woods, hoping that they would stretch from where he was all the way to the Milkwater so that they would not have to go out onto the snowy plains again. But as his companions spoke amongst themselves, he stayed quiet, listening out for any footsteps or anything else that could tell him the wildlings were about to attack.

"Seven hells, it's cold today. I never thought it could get colder up here," muttered one of the builders in complaint.

"Aye, coldest it has been in years," replied Gared, huddling himself together beneath his thick black cloak. "Best for us to return to the Wall before nightfall, it'll only get colder then."

"It gets this cold in the Vale come wintertime. The mountains freeze and send tides of snow rolling to the bottom that can bury a knight on horseback whole," added Waymar. "It gets even worse when the spring comes and the mountains thaw. Even more snow comes tumbling down the mountains, so much it can wipe out an entire village in a heartbeat."

"They must be buried under it...gods, how do they get to the bodies?" asked another.

"When spring comes, the snow at the top of the mountains starts to melt, but at night it freezes again, big pieces as hard as stone and as big as a castle. There's nothing left to bury when they hit you, some others just get buried in the snow further down the mountains, tho-"

Crack

Benjen's sword hand went to his blade at the sound, the other a silent command to halt. Then he looked around. They were in a ditch between two rows of trees, an old stream long since frozen or
dried up, cast in the shadows of the broad trees all around them, all of them big enough to hide a man or a woman on the other side.

It was perfect for an ambush. His rangers were too spread out to protect everyone, even to protect each other - if there were enough wildlings, they might even be able to wipe out his group, he knew. *But it will cost them.*

Waymar stepped towards him cautiously and slowly, fingering the pommel of his own steel as he asked as quietly as he could, his voice as low as the rasp of a blade leaving its scabbard. "Are you sure you heard something?"

Willam took out his crossbow, looking along the sides carefully as Benjen replied. "We're being watched."

Waymar looked around, and then Benjen saw it.

The glimmer of an iron arrowhead darting through the sky. It struck Waymar's breastplate above the heart, but that mattered little. The shaft cracked and broke as the iron bounced off leaving only a scratch mark as the castle forged steel rang like a bell. The arrowhead was blunted from the hit and shot into his left besagew, then it shattered in a storm of sparks and shards of iron.

"**Ambush!**" he roared at the height of his voice, ripping his sword from its sheath as an entire clan's worth of wildlings poured into the ravine, not one of them carrying a weapon alike to any other; some were armed with bone axes, others with ones made from stone, a few had bronze weapons and armor, rarer still were steel longswords stolen from the Watch. His stewards and builders dove to the ground, letting the rangers fight without having to worry about striking down their brothers by accident, trying to avoid getting caught in the melee as his own men surged to fight the rising tide of screaming, shouting men and women.

Willam's crossbow rang out with a loud twang as he shot down a man wearing bronze armor and furs, good armor for any wildling, but against even a cheaply made crossbow he might as well have been naked. The bolt blew through his armor with ease, only the black fletching at the end sticking out from his chest as the lifeless body rolled down into the ditch. Another clansmen rushed him with a hammer of stone, knowing that though he could not be killed with arrow or blade, a hammer could break his bones all the same. His mind was ablaze, not with fear or anger, but with a single question, burning over and over again into the foreground.

*Which clan is this?!?*

He swung low as Waymar charged against a spearwife, slamming into her with his shoulder and sending the woman crashing to the ground with a pained yell before running his blade through her belly. The wildling dove back, just barely, so he pressed the attack, slashing sideways on the return swing, trying to put an end to the fight with the first hit. *If he hits me with that hammer... "For the Watch!"*

He ducked beneath a swing of the wildling's stone hammer, the simple weapon nothing more than a hefty rock held together by sinews and sticks...then, with a single cut, he cleaved across the wildling’s back and down the spine, feeling his blade slip through furs, bronze and bone. The man hadn't the life left to stagger or to cry, only to collapse to the ground like a mummer's puppet with the strings cut. He turned for the next enemy, one with a looted longsword, but it was clear he hadn't the knowledge to use it properly. Their blades locked against one another...and Benjen smiled behind his helm.
Then he slammed his helmeted head against the barefaced wildling, a man with a beard that had just started to grow grey. He yelled out in pain as his nose crumpled and as steaming blood began to pour, but Benjen silenced him as the blade fell from the wildling’s hand with a single thrust through the heart, dislodging the body with a kick. He had been in a hundred fights and only the most vicious wildlings were even close to being a match for him. He had trained at Winterfell from childhood under the watchful eye of the master-at-arms, sparring with his brothers and against the other children his age. His longsword was merely another part of his arm, the black plate armor protecting him a steel skin. Arrows rained down on him from above, but that’s what they were as harmless as against him and all his rangers. The Skagosi impaled another on his halberd before pulling it out and bringing the blade down upon their head, splitting fur, skin and skull the way a common man might split a log for firewood. Another stabbed at him from behind with a spear tipped with sharpened bone, hitting with enough force to knock loose a few scales, but not enough to stop him from killing them with a single blow of his mighty halberd.

Then the wildlings started to run, dropping their weapons and fleeing just as he shoved another towards Waymar Royce's waiting blade, who dispatched them with his long sword so easily it was as if he was cutting through a round of freshly baked bread and not a man. He asked, looking over his men for wounds, "Is everyone alright?"

"I have a scratch in my armor and nothing more," replied the Royce, raising his visor to wipe some sweat from his brow. A fight can make men sweat even here.

"Fine," added the Skagosi with a nod and a smile, wiping down his weapon with his cloak.

Gared groaned, clutching at a cut across his left forearm. A steward quickly rushed over, tearing their cloak and wrapping it around as a bandage as his fellows tended to the rest of the wounded. But it was Willam who asked as he inspected his weapon, "What could make them attack us with such bad weapons? Normally they put up more of a fight than that..."

"Willam's right," growled Gared, looking at his arm. "They were in a hurry to run. Foolish of them to attack us, too."

The air went as cold as ice as a soft snow began to fall down on the group, the cry of the winds turning to a deathly silence. "Another group of wildlings, perhaps?" asked Waymar, sheathing his sword.

"Might be, but they were in bronze," Benjen said, rolling over the body of one of the slain men with his boot to show the bronze scales he had sewn into his leathers. "These were warriors, not huntsmen. They'll have been in battle before, against other clans. They wouldn't run from them, not if it cost them everything they had."

There was a loud rumbling of a charging animal, no, a dozen animals, coming towards them from behind, from the bright shining snows that made it impossible to see. He raised his visor to block the glare of the sun and squinted...and in the distance, he made out fifteen white animals, the largest and most powerful in the center, all with riders, all with weapons, with a T-shaped banner of pitch black and a very complex snowflake sewn into it colored from a silvery-dye that came only from the Reach, the crest given by the Night's Watch to the free folk people they trust as friends and allies. Any settlement flying it had the protection of the Watch and could call the black brothers to arms if they needed to, even being allowed to trade, but they had to provide help for any black brothers who asked for their help, even if it was something as simple as giving them shelter from a harsh blizzard or protecting them from another group. Both sides helped each other where they could, with the
wargs of the Night’s Watch being taught by those of the free folk in exchange for the help of the builders in building the free folk better homes and strong, sturdy stone walls to protect their villages. Our stewards tend to their wounds, just as their healers tend ours.

He smiled as the group rode towards them and as they got closer he could make out the lead rider. They were wearing all white, even a breastplate as white as the snows around them, a full helm, too, items that could only be made by the smiths of the Night’s Watch, so it could only mean that this was someone they trusted more than any other…and he knew exactly who it was. His smile widened, though none of his brothers knew why, that was for certain.

When the old lord Whent had held the great tournament at Harrenhal, he had been bewitched by the beautiful Alyssa Whent, the fair maiden who truly deserved the title, the woman who had been crowned the Queen of Love and Beauty in the last great tourney in the realm, with long brown hair and chestnut eyes and the warmest smile he had ever seen and a kind, gentle heart. She had stunned him, and though his brothers had been busy with other things, he had been speaking with her the entire time, and she was happy to return his feelings. She had been saddened when she lost her title, and he had comforted her through the feast…and afterwards, into the early hours of the morning when she took him to her bedchambers, her muffled moans into his shoulder proved very well she had completely forgotten about the tournament. She had been the one woman who had nearly tempted him out of taking the black, and after he returned North the thought of accepting his father’s offers of land and taking her as his wife had been even more tempting than ever before.

And then came the Rebellion. He had been separated from her by a thousand miles of land and one of the largest wars Westeros had ever seen, but he had longed for her all the same…and when his brother returned at the end of the war to meet his wife with a babe of his own, Benjen had frozen with the thought that it was not his brother’s son, but his own, conceived in the single night of passion between him and his beloved, even refusing to believe that it was Eddard’s child for nearly an hour. Then the thought came back to him again, of marrying Alyssa and taking lands in the North, but he had been drowned with the grief after losing Lyanna, Brandon and their father…and then, when he was ready to choose, he found out Alyssa had died only a few month's after the war's end, from a fall some said. But some think she died of a broken heart and hurled herself down those steps...

He had started towards the Wall the same day, nothing left to keep him in the North, nothing to stop him from fulfilling his promise to the Deathhand.

The monstrous snow bears ran towards them only a little slower than a horse, but a thousand times more dangerous. Her clan had learnt how to tame them, how to use them as mounts without needing to use wargs to break the animals and cause them to hate men and women alike. Horns howled, as they rode towards them, and Waymar stepped besides him disbelieving. "Those bears…they're huge…who are they?"

"She’s the Queen-Beyond-the-Wall, Waymar. Tormund might lead the wildlings, but she leads the free folk."

He smiled again as the bears came to a halt in front of them, and then the leader took off her helmet, revealing her incredible beauty for all to see. She had a long braid of hair the same color as honey - and just as soft, he knew - with quicksilver grey eyes and sharp cheekbones that only added to her majestic beauty. She was born to be a queen, as regal as any woman he had seen, more so than any of the Targaryens he had seen at Harrenhal, for certain, a true warrior-queen. She looked towards him…and he saw the slightest hint of a smile. "We meet again, Benjen."
"She knows you?" Waymar whispered in surprise.

He has no idea...

"A pleasure to see you again, too, Val."

With a small move of her slender waist, the snow bear walked over to him, and when it was right in front of him, the bear looked at him curiously.

Then it licked his face with its warm, rough tongue. He took a step backwards and laughed, as Val and all the others did, wiping his face with his cloak. "It seems she likes you, though I doubt she is the only one," Val looked around at the bodies behind them with a curious but steady eye. "Wildlings, this close to the Wall? I thought they had been driven into the Frostfangs and Thenn?"

"Aye, we know as little about them being so far south as you do," Benjen sighed. "They ambushed us," he saw a brief flash of concern on the queen's face, "But we survived without a loss, only a few injuries."

"Best to burn the bodies of the dead if you can. We have heard...rumors, from some of the other clans further to the north."

Benjen's blood ran cold. He trusted Val always, they were the closest of friends, even lovers once when he had saved her sister from a shadow cat and broken a leg in the process, having to be tended to at the Fist while the rest of his ranging returned to the Wall, leaving him alone with her and all the clans that followed her, some one thousand men, women and children. She had "stolen" him that night, even though he told her what his vows meant he had certainly not tried to stop her from having her way with him. On the contrary, I helped her... He knew she would never lie to him about something like that, something that only meant...Old Nan had told him the stories, about the ice devils that had come in the Long Night, the Others riding their ice spiders and wielding blades so cold they could freeze a man's blood in his veins with a single strike, and the unliving wights that followed their masters into battle and plucked babes from the arms of their mothers to feast on their flesh.

Without hesitation, he turned to his men and gave his orders. "Find the wood for a funeral pyre. We'll burn all the bodies to ashes. Leave nothing."

His men headed to carry out his commands and Val gestured to the forests with the tip of her spear, ordering her protectors to help. Without a single complaint, her followers stepped into the woods with their bears, who were so big and strong a man could stand on the back of one and axe branches from the trees without the bear being bothered whatsoever.

"We were hunting with a group of your wargs, helping them practice on wild animals when one of them was in an eagle and saw your party in the snows. I had thought that you might have gotten lost, Ben."

He smiled at her again. Every time she was around was always a pleasure. "I never get lost, Val, you know that."

"Is that so? Then I suppose you must have stumbled into my cunt on purpose and not by accident."

"Val!" he looked towards the men to see if she had been heard. "You know a black brother is not supposed to do such things."
She laughed, a beautiful sound for him. "If they ever wonder what you were doing, simply tell them you were helping to improve relations between the Watch and my people. It would not be a lie, after all."

He couldn't help but to laugh. "No, I suppose it wouldn't be. How are things against Tormund?"

"Giantsbane? You know as well as I that Qhorin Deathhand is hunting him down with my wargs. It won't be long before he puts the Thunderfist down."

The lands north of the Wall were firmly divided between two groups, the free folk and the wildlings. The wildlings had Tormund Giantsbane as their king, the free folk had Val as their queen, and the Free Folk controlled everything from the Wall north to the Antler river and west to the Frostfangs, with most of their people living in that area, perhaps ten or twenty thousand in total. They could work metals and were putting down the roots of permanent settlements, not like the wildlings who would live in one place for a while before moving on to the next. The Fist of the First Men was where Val and her closest followers had made their home, restoring the old ring fort with the help of the builders to its former glory, and then some, as it was more like a castle now with a town - one that was very little more than a village - surrounding the walls with another wall on the outside to protect the people who settled there from wildling raiders. The Night's Watch trusted them enough to give them weapons and armor, even if they weren't the best they had, they were still a hundred times better than anything the free folk could make on their own. It was they who did most of the real fighting against the wildlings, as they knew exactly how their old friends and now new enemies fought, where they liked to hide, everything about them that could help with defeating them...and now, with the weapons and numbers of the Night's Watch at their side, it was only a matter of time till the King-Beyond-the-Wall was slain...and when that happened, the last of the wildlings would likely submit to Val...and finally, there would be peace in the lands north of the Wall.

"We can only hope so, Val. The Lord Commander wants to build a new fort and has put me in command of it. I was thinking of building it near the Fist."

"Truly?" She smiled at him, a sweet smile...and for a moment he had completely forgotten about the oaths he swore before a heart tree and could only think about how she had smiled just the same when they had made love together for the first time...though he knew it was not meant to be, he was a brother of the Night's Watch and she a queen. "I would like that. Even if you must pretend to have no interest in me, I would count you as one of my closest friends all the same. When the Giantsbane is finally slain, I will hold a feast at the Fist. I want you to be there, Ben. As a friend if not as my lover."

"Thank you, Val. You know we cannot be together, no matter how much we might want to, but my oaths don't stop me from being friends with you."

He looked back and saw his men had assembled the funeral pyre and the snow bears were sinking their teeth into the bodies of the wildlings before walking over to the pyre and dropping them onto the pile, crushing through bronze with ease as their riders trailed besides them, patting the bears that were as much their friends as they were their mounts before climbing back on and returning to Val's side.

"It was good to speak with you, Benjen. I must return to hunt, lest your wargs get lost in the woods again." She smiled at him one last time before putting her helmet back on and leading her bear and all the others away.
"Gods, she is the prettiest woman in the Seven Kingdoms..." muttered Waymar once Val was away.

"In the world, Waymar. She is the most beautiful woman in the world."

He sighed to himself in near silence at the thought of what his life might have been like with her had he not been a black brother. He would live with her, at the Fist, using all the things he had learnt in his days at Winterfell to help her rule the land and bring it closer to the Seven Kingdoms to the point that maybe, in the future, there wouldn't be a need for the Night's Watch anymore, or even a Lord Paramount beyond the Wall and not a king or queen. They would have had children together, strong little boys and girls who would play together in the snow, laughing and teasing and having sons and daughters of their own when they were old enough.

He lowered the face plate of his helm as he walked over, taking a flint from his pocket and drawing his sword to strike it against. With a single flick the sparks shot onto the wood and took to flame, leaping from one piece of wood to the next, consuming the bodies with its hunger.

And as he looked into the depths of the flames and thought of what could have been, a single cold tear rolled down his cheek.

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End of Part 10!

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy, this part might've taken a while but I hope it was worth the wait The new ergonomic keyboard might be slowing me down a bit, but god damn it drastically lowers the pain of long writing sessions When I am fully used to it and can sustain my maximum writing speed of a hundred words a minute I'll certainly be able to get a part like this out every single day, but that's still a while off yet

Anyway, in this part, we see the lands on the other side of the Wall. The Night's Watch is stronger than it has been in a very long time, so powerful they have no choice but to start expanding into the lands beyond the Wall, and that is the precise reason for Benjen's mission. They were there to find a good site to start construction of a new castle, so that the Watch could project its power into the Haunted Forest and beyond, making it easier for them to support their allies. Now, they're not meant to start work themselves, just to find the perfect site so that the builders can show up in force and get to work with a ranger-free folk escort. Benjen is going to be the commander of the fortress, by the decision of the Lord Commander. The Watch is a big organization now, with a lot of recruits from across the North, and for the most part they're either volunteers or low level criminals, not killers and rapists. Even the Night's Watch has standards, and though they can never turn down anyone who is going to the Wall, they can certainly...deal with them, unofficially of course. It's not the Lord Commander keeping those kinds of people out of the Watch, but the common rank and file brothers who are. The Watch has strong relations with the free folk and do allow trade to pass through the Wall to trade with them, even trading with the people at the Fist of the First Men themselves and giving them castle forged weapons and armor to help in the war against the real, savage wildlings. Val is seen as the perfect leader for the free folk by
the Night's Watch, but it was not them who put her in charge.

The free folk did. They like her a lot and follow her as their queen the same way the wildlings follow Tormund as their king. They're two separate groups and they hate each other as the wildlings raid the free folk and call them kneelers, while the free folk fight back and defend themselves and call the wildlings savages. The Watch is pouring all its strength into supporting the free folk...and because of that, the wildlings are getting crushed and driven further and further away from the Wall...and closer and closer to the Lands of Always Winter.

And some wildlings are more willing to stand and die than flee into the Lands of Always Winter... Rumors are rumors, however, and no one knows for sure what is going on in that land of snow and ice and Other things.

Anyway, Benjen too has benefited greatly from the increased wealth of the Starks, in that he has a full suit of plate armor that he wears when he goes on a ranging, which means he is nigh invincible against most wildlings. They just don't have the metallurgy to be able to break through his armor, but they are a clever people and have come up with a few ideas of their own on how to get through such protection...like using something like a mace to break bones and kill a man that way.

Like all the other Starks, Benjen has benefited from the increased wealth of the Starks...in that he has a full suit of plate that he wears while going on rangings, along with having more expensive training when it comes to swordsmanship. Rickard Stark spared no expense on any of his children, something Eddard has copied with his own, hence why Ol' Benjenobi here just slaughtered several several wildlings without breaking a sweat. He's got a ton of training to draw on, combined with a ton of actual battle experience. He won't go down easily and certainly not against wildlings with obsolete weapons and armor and no training and little experience in a head on fight Of course, he isn't invincible.
Robb II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Winterfell, a few days later...

Robb took another spoonful of the golden honey, warmed to make it flow a little easier in the cold of the early morning and drizzled it over his porridge, stirring it in before taking the first spoonful and washing it down with a cup of a good, dry Vale cider. Today was the morning of the hunt, and if there was ever a reason to have a lighter breakfast it was the sighting of a great, strong stag in the woods. It would be the perfect afternoon meal, once they had managed to track it down, kill it and bring it back to Winterfell, the wonderful taste of slow cooked venison easily worth saving plenty of space for, but more importantly he avoiding strong drink - only the gods alone could know how much they would probably end up drinking while on the hunt - so that his mind could be as sharp as possible. Drinking too much fogged the mind, a dangerous thing on a hunt like this, even when surrounded by friends and family who would look out for him and keep him out of too much trouble, but it also dulled the senses and made it much harder to bag any game. And father is coming, too. He's been busy lately, so he's coming along to spend some time with his sons. But...

He looked down to the far end of the table, smiling at Alys Karstark. She looked beautiful today, with her long brown hair carefully brushed to perfection and wearing a good black and white riding dress that complimented her slender waist and hips, the white starburst of her family. She smiled back at him, her cheeks turning a light shade of red and her grey-blue eyes filled with loving warmth. ...he's not the only one coming along with us. Gods be good, she looks wonderful today...

His sister Sansa enjoyed riding for fun, and where she led all the other ladies followed, just like him all the Wolves. It was the natural order of things, and it meant that most of the maidens in Winterfell would be coming along with them for the day, though most of them were there only to ride and to talk and watch, not to hunt, with the exception of Dacey Mormont...and Arya, who was keen to try and bring back a prize of her own and prove to their mother that she was as good a hunter as any of them. She might as well be trying to storm Moat Cailin. All of his friends were going, but as he looked across the lady's table, he couldn't find Wylla anywhere, even at her normal seat besides Lyanne.

He swallowed as he turned to his half-brother and asked, "Jon, have you seen Wylla this morning?"

His brother paused, his fork stuck in the greater half of a beef sausage. "No, I haven't. I don't think she's been outside of her chambers the whole morning."

Torhren Karstark leaned over, speaking a little quieter than the normal boisterous tones of their table. "She's still in bed, from what I know. Couldn't sleep the whole night, Maester Luwin's given her something to get her some rest," his brother Eddard looked over, and while his brother was distracted reached over with his fork, about to impale one of Torhren's slices of bacon. Without even turning to face him, his brother spoke with a voice as cold as ice, "Touch my bacon and I will cut your heart out with a soup spoon."

Eddard backed down, slumping back into his seat and focusing on his own plate as Robb and Jon laughed between themselves.
"Last night was too warm," Robb said as he stirred his porridge more, trying to stop it from clumping together into a single ball of oats and sugar. "I can't blame her for wanting to get a little more rest."

_I could lay bricks with this..._

He took another spoonful as Donnel Snowstark and the Smalljon Umber, both sat opposite of one another just three chairs down the table - both of them wearing thick travelling leathers and both of them having muscles so large they wouldn't shame oxen - glared at one another, like two predators watching one another and waiting for the other to make the first move before they struck in turn, not even touching their plates or breaking their gaze as they stared into one another's eyes, daring the other to look away. They had never been enemies, certainly not, but they were rivals, as closely matched in strength and agility as Robb and Jon were, they naturally competed against one another in all things, from their practice fights against one another in the courtyard to hunting and feasting. Once, Donnel had gone north with his kin, beyond the Wall and into the Haunted Forest on a hunt only to return with the antlers of a strong elk brought down by his family, and in response the Smalljon had gone with his father and uncles and returned with the entire head of a shadow cat...which he kept at his bedside as a trophy, if what Adara said was true.

_If they go out there again, they'll need to hunt Others and ice dragons..._

"I will be the man to bring back the stag," said Donnel, never breaking eye contact.

The Smalljon said nothing...and then he laughed. "You? The only thing you will be bringing back is a full quiver and a clean spear, not a stag."

Donnel turned red, but before he could reply the small Artos Swampstark, a man a year older than Robb yet not much bigger than Bran, said to both with a small smile, "Neither of you will be bringing back the stag, because while you two are fighting over who gets the kill, I'll have thrown my net, made the kill, brought it back, skinned it and made a cloak from the pelt."

"Big words for such a small man," teased the Snowstark with a smile, finally turning away from the Smalljon. _They're both cousins, but a southerner would have never guessed it._

"Big words, aye, but only a fool would think there aren't advantages to being small and quick on my feet."

The door to the great hall opened, and in stepped his younger brother Brandon, his vambrace of leather and banded iron fastened around his left arm and on it rested Goldwing, looking around curiously in utter silence. Without a word he threw his hand forward, and the bird shot across the room, diving on his plate upon the dais, snatching a sausage and looping around to his master in a single flight...all while Catelyn stared on in utter horror, about to say something before sighing and looking back at her plate in defeat, Ned saying something that made her smile again...till Brandon took the sausage from his bird, broke it in two and ate half for himself before giving Goldwing the other, smiling and laughing as he did.

_He'll be hunting with his bird like usual, so he's going to get most of the smaller game. He's always been good at hunting squirrels and rabbits with Goldwing, but that bird has only ever gotten bigger and bigger, he could probably bring down a deer with it by now._

Hunting in the North had always been more energetic and faster paced than in the south, if only because they had so much more ground to cover in so little time before sunset, which made things so
much harder for them; so sometimes, they hunted from horseback instead of on foot, with lances like boar spears and hunting crossbows, ready to charge or shoot at the first sign of any prey, or ready to quickly free if they encountered something they couldn't handle on their own, like a band of wildling raiders, but no wildling had made it south of the wall for over a century if what Old Nan said was true. **Even if they did make it over the Wall, it'd be a death sentence for them to try and make it through the Gift, but if they got here, it'd be easy for the four dozen of us to drive them off while hunting, even with us having to protect my sister and her friends. But this time, we'll be hunting on foot anyway, with a few men of the household guard around to look after our horses, since having too many steeds around would scare off the stag and the rest of the game.**

He turned to Jon, smiling. "This is going to be a great hunt, I can *feel* it."

"I hope so," his brother replied, "It'd be a waste for us to find nothing out there, but even still, it's fight night later."

Years before, Rodrik had made them practice fighting without weapons or armor, as if they had been caught in the midst of a drunken brawl or attacked on the way back to their chambers after a feast, meaning they had to defend themselves with their bare hands, but it had roots going back centuries, to the days of the Kings of in the North and the competitions they held long before the Andals had crossed the Narrow Sea. Whereas the joust was the focus of an Andal tournament, in the lands of the First Men, it was the *melee* that was considered to be the greater spectacle, with the winners getting far more glory and wealth than the winner of the joust. **Any man was allowed to enter the melee, even if they had never fought before in their lives, since everyone was given the same weapons and armor.** In those days, there had been three melees; the first was the same as the one seen at any great tournament, usually ten sides of ten, for a total of a hundred fighters against one another at the same time, but sometimes it was even larger on special occasions. The second was unarmed single combat, man against man in a circle placed before a heart tree, as no man would dare to be dishonest in full sight of the gods. They fought wearing only their breeches and with their only weapon their fists, feet and skill, a sport where a common lumberjack could do just as well as the son of a lord if the gods favored them more. It was in a match just like that when King Rodrik Stark won against the King of the Iron Islands after an hour of nonstop fighting at a godswood on the western shore, taking so many blows to the head that it left his mind clouded for the rest of his life and his voice slurred, but the kraken was even worse off, losing not just all memory of his sons and the ability to stand without something to support him, but Bear Island, too.

The third type of the melee was the most dangerous - the mounted melee, where fifty men would face off against one another in a free for all...on horseback, a sport that was as bloody and dangerous as it was entertaining to watch, it had long since died out never to come again, for good reasons in his opinion. **It's hard to ride in the next tournament if you got maimed in the one you were just in...but the unarmed melee mostly died out after Aegon's Conquest, but my grandfather brought it back, saying it'd be a good way to relieve tension. He always loved old traditions like that, everyone knows it, but the Volantenes have fighting arenas, too, just more dangerous ones.**

His uncle Brandon had a taste for the unarmed melee and was as fierce without a sword in his hands as he was with one, he proved that at Harrenhal, where he knocked out an anointed knight in front of half the realm after the ser had said something his uncle had taken offense to, but Robb didn't know what. **Father doesn't like to talk about the tourney at Harrenhal or the rebellion much, but uncle Benjen told me about the fight. He grabbed him by the shoulder and just...beat him senseless!**

There were still rules to the fights - there were to be not hits below the waist and above the knee, no eye gouging and no hitting a fallen opponent - but they were still dangerous, so Rodrik only allowed them to do it for half an hour per man every fortnight, watching over every bout in person to make
"I'd bet ten silvers that Dacey will be there," Robb said between spoonfuls, "Double that if she takes part and another ten that she wins."

Jon laughed. "What makes you so sure she'll be there?"

"Arya's been wanting to go and watch the fights, but mother's only letting her go if Dacey is by her to keep her out of too much trouble."

"I don't know if she'll actually fight though, I mean, she's been there a hundred times before but never fought anyone."

"I think Arya will encourage her to get into a fight this time. She's as hard as Valyrian steel, she'll win if she fights someone her size. But if she fought you," he gave Jon a teasing smile, "We'll have to find more room in the crypts."

His brother turned red as he laughed. Everyone knew how embarrassed and shocked Dacey had been when he had abruptly walked across the courtyard and asked for her hand in marriage - without even telling her how he felt at anytime before - so a fight between Jon and Dacey would be the perfect opportunity for her to get some vengeance, and what was more embarrassing for a man than being beaten by a woman? If an Andal knight got knocked out by the maiden he was meant to rescue, he'd probably kill himself afterwards. He had heard some of the older servants talk about how Dacey and Arya were just the same as Maege and Lyanna when they had been their age, since they acted the same, talked the same and even looked the same; with Dacey sometimes helping Arya to sneak out of the castle and teaching her how to fight, just as Maege did for Lyanna when she was the same age. If only my aunt was still alive...she would have loved to meet my sister. Once, when he and Jon were half their age, their father had told him how Robb had actually managed to worm his way out of Catelyn's grasp just long enough to grab hold of one of his aunt's fingers...for the first and only time before she was buried in the crypts of Winterfell. It was as if he wanted to be held by her, from what his father had told him, and his mother had nodded in agreement and said it was true, since he had been down in the crypt to see her but he had been so young he couldn't remember any of it whatsoever, and knew the look of his aunt only from her statue in the crypts.

He heard the familiar voice of his cunning and clever mentor, the Free Citizen Horrono Vaenyris. "If you are placing a bet on the fight, betting on Dacey would be a mistake."

"How come?" asked Jon.

"Any honorable man would refrain from hitting a woman, and when they must they would try to do as little harm as possible," said the Free Citizen carefully with a sly smile. "So, assuming her foe chose to fight her, it means that they chose to fight against a woman. They have chosen to fight what others would believe to be dishonorable or unfair, and that tells you that they will not hold back...they have chosen a fight that they believe gives them the greatest advantage over their opponent."

"That's unfair," Robb said. Who would be so foul as to fight a woman only because she is easier to defeat than fighting a man?

"It is also very clever. Remember what I said about the perception of strength, Robb. If I was a
betting man, I would choose...him," Vaenyris gestured to Artos Swampstark with a nod of his head. "People will underestimate him, think he is weak and easy to defeat because of his stature, and he knows this. All crannogmen know that they cannot win a frontal attack, so they strike wherever their foe is weakest."

The Volantene's voice became one filled with respect. "They know how to fight to their strengths and how to avoid their weaknesses. Come tonight, I believe you will learn that lesson well."

Is there nothing this man doesn't know?

Robb smiled towards the tiger; he had only known him for a handful of days, but it felt like he had learnt so much from him already and Robb knew that there was still so much more to learn. He had a fast and sharp mind and an excellent memory to go with it, but he was so clever it felt like there was not a single fox in the world that could even begin to match him. He's brilliant...I have so much to learn from him! When the time comes and I have sons of my own, I would gladly pay whatever price he asks to have him teach them, too. He was not the only person in Winterfell to count the Volantene tiger as a friend, Domeric had told him how he had tuned his harp and made the sound a hundred times richer than it had been before, and it was common knowledge that many women - but surprisingly, not Adara - had been drawn towards his handsome and exotic looks, though he acknowledged their compliments and admiration with polite courtesy and nothing more.

Out of curiosity, he asked, "What do they hunt in Volantis?"

The Free Citizen laughed. "Just about everything there is that lives under the sun. Most of the more powerful families have a menagerie of animals from across the entire world, for boasting, for showing to guests, and sometimes after a celebration they will let an animal out into the wild only to hunt it down for the last piece of sport before the guests go home, the greater the animal, the greater the prestige for hunting it down."

Jon asked another question while Robb listened, content to eat his porridge. Next time, I think I will just have what everyone else has instead of trying to be clever... "What happens to someone like me in Volantis? A bastard?"

"Bastards in Volantis and in Valyria before the Doom were...uncommon, to say the least. It is not because because men and women do not lie with one another outside of marriage, they certainly do, but within the Black Walls the old Valyrian way of wedding brother to sister is alive and strong. Who is a bastard, then, if his mother and father were brother and sister, only that they were unwed? In Volantis and in Valyria before it, that child is considered but another part of the family; there is no such thing as having too many kin."

"But who would they marry if they don't have brothers or sisters?"

"A simple question with a simple answer. They marry their mother or father in that case."

Robb sputtered as he struggled to swallow his oats. Everyone in the Seven Kingdoms knew that the dragonlords had wed brother to sister even in the first days of the Freehold, with the Targaryens bringing the tradition to Westeros, but he had never once heard of how they would wed mother to son or father to daughter. That's...that's even worse!

The Free Citizen smiled. "As you can imagine, that makes it very, very hard for a family to ever die out. So long as there is at least one member of the family left young enough to still make children, the family cannot die. For example, if every member of a family was wiped out in battle barring, say, a
son, six-and-ten years old, he would lie with a whore of the Valyrian look however long is needed to sire a daughter, then he would wed her at birth and wait for her to come of age. Sometimes, if two families are almost extinct, with only one daughter and one son left, they might couple with one another instead to make a son and a daughter to be married to their mother and father before leaving one another."

"That is how the Blackfyres managed to keep their line alive so long, even in exile. Maelys the Monstrous was the product of his father bedding a whore then bedding the resulting daughter after she came of age."

He saw the obvious discomfort on the faces of Robb and Jon before continuing on a less...horrifying topic. "On the other hand, a man could expect to have up to thirteen wives, so that when all is said and done, there are fourteen people in the marriage, one for each of the Flames and one for each of the gods." He laughed. "That leaves very little time to have bastards, I assure you."

"If your father had that many wives, you must have half a hundred brothers and sisters!"

"My father had only one wife, since our family had fallen on hard times," he uttered a quiet, sad sigh, "As for siblings, I am the eldest of eleven, with five brothers and five sisters."

Robb pushed his empty bowl forward after nodding in understanding, finally finished with the mortar like porridge, he wiped his mouth with a square napkin made from snow white linen and embroidered with a grey direwolf - a fashion for dining that had managed to make the leap across the Narrow Sea. It had quickly spread across the North, as it was far more sightly and clean than just wiping on one's sleeve. He rose to his feet and was quickly followed by everyone else at his table, whether they were finished or not.

"I hadn't even gotten to my toast yet," muttered his brother. "You could have waited a little longer."

"Come on, Jon, if we don't get riding soon the stag might run off."

Already fully dressed for the hunt in his own riding leathers, he took his thick woolen travelling cloak from the wall, glancing towards the dais to see his father's solemn nod of approval before heading outside, into the bright light of the early morning. A thin snow struggled to come down, melting before it reached the ground; the perfect weather for a hunt, though if the snow started to come down thick and heavy, it would make things far more challenging and fun.

"Now we just need to wait for Dacey and -"

The Mormont woman rode past him, giving them all a teasing smile from atop her chestnut brown hunter, a horse that had been born and raised on Bear Island. She was fully dressed for the hunt, holding her hunting spear with an experienced grip, her bow slung against her side and its quiver at her tip, the arrows fletched with black and green. ...*How? She wasn't even in the great hall! How could they be mounted up and ready before us?* Arya rode past on her own horse, dressed and equipped just as Dacey was, even making the same teasing smile.

Dacey looked down to them all as Arya watched on with a proud smile, "With how long you were all taking, Arya and I were starting to think we would have to go hunting by ourselves."

...*they must have already ate. That's the only explanation.*

Robb sighed as an army of servants brought forth their steeds, hunting spears and bows and arrows,
enough for every man in his group. Arya laughed as she urged her horse onwards, towards the gatehouse, as natural a rider as her aunt had been. He climbed atop his horse, following his littlest sister and Dacey towards the gatehouse - but going no further, not till his father was there to lead the way - while waiting for his sister and all her friends. He looked towards the tall and strong keep of Winterfell, to the place where Wylla was, and before he could think again he heard the Free Citizen again, far more serious than before, snowflakes melting in his silver hair.

"I made the same mistake, once," the tiger said with a somber voice, following his gaze towards the keep before looking back towards him.

"What happened?"

"I tried to love two different women and I paid the price by losing everything I ever cared for in the world. Robb, do not make the same mistake I did: pick one of them, love them and them alone."

*It had just been a silly idea anyway. My father would have never allowed me to be with both of them and hells, they would have probably tried to kill each other if he did...or worse, they would try and kill each other's children so that theirs would inherit Winterfell.*

"You should come hunting with us, Vaenyris, I could have one of the servants find you a spare horse and I would enjoy the talk," he said with a smile.

"Not today, but perhaps another time. I have much reading to do, since it is one thing to know the Volantene interpretation of things and another to know the Westerosi version."

"Some other time, then...and I'll remember what you said, don't worry."

The tiger smiled before continuing on his way and leaving Robb surrounded by all his friends, but alone with his thoughts.

*All the riding in this hunt will give me time, and I've got a lot to think about...*

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**End of Part 11!**

Chapter End Notes

Well, where to start?

In this part, Robb eats a bowl of porridge and nothing else of importance happens!

Just kidding

For the unmarried maidens of the North, there is no greater catch than Robb Stark except the heir to the Iron Throne itself, and so many ladies have tried to win his affections over the years, though many of them now know it will come down to either Wylla or Alys...and to say competition is fierce might be a little bit of an understatement. There are dirty tactics involved, but they tend to be...subtle, a way to get some alone time with him so that they can work their magic, for a lack of better words, but their
interest in him is genuine, hence why they are both pulling out all of the stops. To top it off, they have been encouraged by their families, since a marriage alliance with the Starks has a ton of benefits, not the least being the fact it’ll become much more likely for them to receive beneficial rights and privileges from Winterfell - making White Harbor a staple port would only be the first step if Wylla married Robb, while similar things would certainly happen in the Karstark lands if Alys and Robb married together.

Not to mention the benefits of having one of their kin in control of Winterfell after Robb has sons and daughters of his own. It would put the Karstarks or the Manderlys in a very powerful position inside the North, especially in regards to the other vassals, since they can press issues on the people around them with the knowledge that Winterfell will support their advances.

Such is the long dance of internal politics in the North

And we also see Donnel and the Smalljon do something more than just stand around looking tough. They might seem to be a little harsh against one another, but they're actually cousins and the Snowstarks and Umbers have a long history of intermarrying - Mors Umber's daughter was never abducted by wildlings in this timeline, and is actually Donnel's mother. Of course, they've got a cousin-ly rivalry going on, where the one tries to one up the other whenever they can...and come fight night, things get very interesting for those who like to watch the fights They're both roughly equal height and weight, so they're both evenly matched, which means fights get...fierce.

And speaking of fight night, we see another Northern tradition that got revived! As we know, the Starks won back Bear Island through a wrestling match, though what they would call "wrestling" is definitely far, far more savage than what we would think of it today, that's for sure. The only reason they're not allowed to hit below the belt here is because people need their goolies in order to sire children, not because of any concern over personal safety, and eye gouging is a very quick way to risk destroying one's vision, too dangerous a thing when these men are expected to go back to being friends after a fight. In the past, the unarmed melee was one of the main events in a Northern fighting competition which placed the melee as a whole above the lists in prestige, since even then the North had little taste for fancy pageantry, but a deep respect and enjoyment for a demonstration of martial skill in a fair, honest fight. In the case of the First Man armed melees, everyone was expected to fight with the same weapons and armor, since it is their skill that should be shown off, not who has the fanciest sword or the shiniest armor.

While the Northern version of the melee is still practiced only by a few regions on the fringes, like Skagos, and the mounted melee by no one with any common sense, the unarmed melee is fairly popular high and low as a popular sport, even being done by the Wolves of Winterfell against one another as a way to blow off steam and build hardiness, things like that.

And of course, it goes without saying that Robb thinks highly for the grandfather, uncle and aunt he never had the chance to know, sometimes wondering what life would be like if they were still around.

Oh, and Free Citizen Horrono Vaenyris makes an appearance in this part! He's teaching Robb the value of being cunning and unpredictable, as well as a lot of other things, the most prominent of which in this part is some more things about life in Volantis and Valyria. Of course, as I said in the first part, Robb's not Tywin Lannister, so he won't be
arranging a Red Wedding or anything like that any time soon

Now, with the summary done, it's time for me to rest...

But first, I have a question: would people be interested in, say, an Adara PoV?

In my opinion, she's a very interesting character, for reasons that would become clear if you see things from her perspective...
Near Winterfell - The First of March, 298 Aegon's Conquest.

Adara looked around with curious eyes as her horse carefully stepped across the rougher terrain of the forest floor, uninterested in the simple conversations of the boys as they tried so hard to find something to hunt. They were dismounted and on foot, but she and all the other ladies and the household guard escorting them were riding for the simple pleasure of being in the countryside. The North was as vast as the rest of the Seven Kingdoms put together, with mountains like the Vale and the Westerlands, wet rolling hills like the Stormlands and great rushing rivers like the Riverlands, though there was not a single desert or anything like one in the North. *Only the desert devils in Dorne have those, but who cares about Dorne, these days? They are a faded power who will only get weaker and weaker as time goes on while the rest of the Seven Kingdoms grow more and more powerful. A blind man could see it.* Theon walked alongside her, his bow in hand, smiling as he always did in her presence and looking around for prey, often in vain, since Brandon had already filled a game bag and was half way through the second after catching a dozen hares, eight squirrels and two foxes with his monstrous eagle.

*He is the man that will make me the lady of the Iron Islands, even if he doesn't realize it yet.*

She flashed him a small smile, with the look in her eye that drove men *wild.* Some people tended to think of her as a harlot, a whore who spread her legs for any man, but in her veins coursed the blood of Lann the Clever and Brandon the Builder, great men who had created great dynasties that had stood the test of time with ease and became two of the greatest powers in Westeros, and she was far more cunning than most ever realized, except perhaps for her sweet, innocent little sister, who completely resembled her in body if not in mind or soul, who - as loyal and loving as ever - was content to stay quiet and not let people know of her thoughts and feelings. Years before, at the end of the Greyjoy Rebelllion, she, her sister and her brother had all headed back to the Darkport to celebrate the victory with the rest of their family, and it was the day she had met her cousins, Jaime, Cersei and even the dwarf, Tyrion. It was a day of celebration of the victory of the Darksstarks and the Lannisters over the Greyjoys and the rest of the Iron Islands, a toast to the conquering heroes on both sides of the family, and a thanks from Lord Kevan for coming to their aid after the destruction of the Lannister fleet while it was still moored in port.

Even her uncle Tywin was there, and though he had reputation for being ruthless and as cunning as any man could be, she thought that, perhaps, he had a gentler side somewhere within in his heart, the side that had won the affections of his beloved Joanna and cared so much for his eldest son that he taught him to properly read and write when the maester had long given up, or the man that had won the affections of the people of Lannisport who applauded him more than the king. *A cruel man would never be so loved, or do such a thing as to help his son and his kin. He merely does whatever he has to do for the sake of his family, as I would do in his place.* It was the first time she had met her cousins and just as her brother Tygett looked up to Jaime Lannister, dreaming to be just as great a knight as he, she had seen Cersei Lannister, her cousin, her *queen,* and saw everything she ever wished to be. She had spent hours in admiration of the proud lioness, from the start of the feast from when they were introduced to one another to the end of it, taking in everything she said with delight.

"...the greatest weapon you could ever use is the one between your legs..."
The words echoed through her mind as they always had, the image of the golden lioness with her emerald eyes and wineglass in hand as strong as it had been when she had first seen them so long ago. No lesson the regal queen had taught her had sunk in deeper than it, and it had shaped her into the woman she was today, cunning and clever and seductive, able to bend a man to her will with a blink of her grey eyes, a smile and a sway of her hips. She had been blessed by the gods with beauty, though she knew she certainly wasn’t the greatest in the realm; but like a boy practicing with their swords to become a deadly warrior, she had honed her skills in the art of charming men over the years, laying with them often, reading exotic tomes from across the Narrow Sea about the art of making love, even trying out entirely new ideas...and now, she could finish a man with three flicks of her wrists, the Greyjoy boy was proof enough of that. Now, men rushed to her bidding for the hope of a mere taste of the pleasure she could give them, and she had many friends in Winterfell’s halls high and low who had been swayed by her charms without her once laying a finger on them. She could get almost anything she wanted for free and have people bring it to her, she could play men against one another with so much as a whisper, twist their loyalties as easy as wringing out a towel.

And all that built up for one thing : Theon Greyjoy. Oh, she did like him for what he could be at the best of times; strong, confident and loving, but that was not the only reason she had set her sights upon him, no, it was to remove the one and only threat to the rest of her kin, Lannister, Stark and Darkstark. Before the war, before she had went to Winterfell, even, she had made friends with many of her father’s guards, but first amongst them all was their captain, a young handsome man called Brandon. He was not noble of birth, but he was all the more so of heart, generous and friendly, even humble, Brandon was the uncle she had never had in her childhood. He had been taken alongside her father’s host when it went to war against the traitors, he was the first of them off the ship, leading the charge against the defenders of one of the isles...and he was the first of them to die, his shoulder torn apart by a thrown axe that ripped open an artery and made him bleed to death in those forsaken sands. She and her sister had mourned and wept for him as if he truly was their uncle by blood, and she hoped to never again see another body covered by a Darkstark banner, not if she could ever help it again.

But with everyone ahead of him in the succession killed by the war, my Theon will inherit the Iron Islands whenever his father dies...and I will be his wife, since he already has trouble finishing with any woman other than myself. I will ensure that the Iron Islands are never a threat to my family, to the North or the Westerlands ever again, even if I must rule them from the shadows or drive them into a ruin they could never recover from.

I will never let another war happen, not if I can help it, but if I was wrong about Theon and he is mad enough to try and follow in his father’s steps...well, I suppose one of our little wolflions would be coming into their inheritance early, then.

She concealed her sigh of disappointment with a breath. Were it not for how she desperately wished to keep the peace and stop the Ironborn from being a threat, she would have turned her eyes on the young heir to Winterfell, Robb. He is the man any grown lady with a thimbleful of sense would dream of marrying...healthy, strong and so very handsome, with a loving and honest heart, just like his father and he is the heir to Winterfell and the North, too...gods, what woman wouldn’t want him just for that alone?

His half-brother is certainly a pleasure to look at, too...damn this weakness of mine...

She had given her maidenhead to Theon years ago, so as to stroke the ego of the self-centered Greyjoy and make him all the more susceptible to her charms, but that night in the dark had not been
the first time she had been close with someone, certainly not, there were many ways to be intimate with a man without having to have them slip inside her. My mother once told me that all my innocence had went into Lyanne when we shared the womb together. My little sister hasn't even kissed a boy yet, and here I am, half a hundred different men bedded. If the gods didn't want us to have sex, they should have never made us crave it or made it so damned fun. People like to think that only men want it, but they are lying to themselves if they think that's true. Their mother had once told her and Lyanne how surprised she had been when she had first came to Winterfell at the young age of six-and-ten, just wedded to a husband she thought she would grow to hate, not love and one she planned on never sharing a bed with again if she had the choice. But when she arrived at the Darkport, instead of seeing filthy shacks built all over haphazardly, flea ridden wild dogs in the streets or a savage, fierce people of bare-chested barbarians only a little different than Dothraki screamers; no, what she saw was a small but wealthy port, thriving off the trade of the western shore of Westeros, with the roofs of many houses made from slate tiles, the streets the very image of peace and prosperity and the people eager to meet the woman who was the bride of their lord's son.

*She said it reminded her of home.*

She laughed and Theon looked at her in confusion. "My mother and father hate each other, but love each other, too," she explained. "They both act the exact same, so sometimes they argue long and hard and other times...well, my sister and I had to come from somewhere."

Theon laughed, her brother Tygett chuckled and Lyanne blushed in silence.

Suddenly, at the edge of her vision a single, small movement stood out, something she knew could not have been caused by the low breeze or an illusion caused by her riding, no, this must have been caused by an animal. In silence, hoping to help Theon catch at least *something* in this hunt, she subtly pointed with a flick of her wrist and a glance of her eyes...and Theon saw it, as she knew he would. *He's no fool. He might be self-centered and arrogant, but he is not a fool.*

A plump brown rabbit that had blended in perfectly with the forest around it till it had moved.

Theon deftly drew an arrow from his bow without once breaking his gaze on his prey, nocked the black and gold fletched arrow with an arm as steady as a statue's and let loose without even flinching.

Then Goldwing shot down from the treetops, snatching the rabbit and gone again in the blink of an eye. The arrow struck the ground harmlessly where the rabbit's neck had once been. Brandon his brother's and all the other boys laughed as the eagle circled around the trees and landed on his vambrace, offering the kill to Brandon, who took it and dropped it into his bag as his father watched on with a smile.

"Gods be good, Bran, you should leave some for the rest of us," said Jon with a smile as Brandon closed his bag again. "If you keep this up, you'll be the only one coming back with anything."

"I wouldn't be surprised if he kills the stag with his eagle," added Robb, shifting an auburn hair from his eyes as he looked into the woods around them. "It can't be far. Bran, use Goldwing to find him for us...and give us a fighting chance,"

Bran smiled at his brothers as he threw his arm forward and allowed Goldwing to take flight once again, letting the great eagle soar past the leaves and branches into the sky high above, his mind half in the bird and half not, leaving his human body to walk alongside them like a ship sailing without a crew. It took months of long and dedicated practice for a warg to be able to control his human body
at the same time as wearing a skin, yet alone to be aware of the events going on around both of them and only the best wargs could truly control both bodies at once as if there was no difference between them...and from there, the only place that more experience could take them was the amount of skins they could wear at one time. When I go to the Iron Islands with Theon, I will need to take a few wargs with me, then I will start filling the court with people who want peace, not warmongers and raiders. Most Ironborn would rather smash a door down than open it, so it'll be hard to find the people I want...but a few killings here, a bribe there and everything will go as planned.

Uncle Kevan will be so proud of me when everything is done, maybe Tywin, too. They will never have to worry about Lannisport or the Rock being attacked ever again. Oh! Maybe the Tyrells and the Redwynes will send me a wedding gift, since the Arbor might as well turn their fleet into wine racks.

"Theon, we should visit the capital sometime, I am sure Lord Stark could be persuaded to let you leave for a little time, so long as my family escorted you."

It would let me have a chance to meet with Cersei again. She's everything I have always wanted to be...

"I've always wanted to try a girl with the Valyrian look, but Lord Stark would never let me leave," he answered with a sigh and a frown. "I'll only be allowed to leave when my father dies."

He will probably be dead before long anyway. He might not go on many raids of his own anymore, but from what I know of how Pyke is built, it's not the safest castle in a storm...

"That's a shame, I'm sure princess Myrcella would be smitten if she ever met you in person," That is the encouragement for his ego...and now for the point, "And it would be a great way for us to meet all the other men and women of the capital."

Theon's eyes glowed with pride, "I'll ask him sometime, but not now."

As easy as ever, Theon.

"Adara....you know our father wouldn't want us to leave the North, Adara," spoke her sister quietly as she rode alongside her. "It's our home, and it's safe here."

"But we can't stay at home forever, sweet sister," she said with a smile as she turned her attention to her twin sister. "Babies leave their cradles, young eagles leave the nest of their mother and father as they grow, even dragons leave the sides of their mothers as soon as they are big enough to fend for themselves in the world."

"I didn't mean like that...I mean, we know the North, we know the sons of all the lords and ladies, we know if something goes wrong, we're not far from help...but if we went to the south..."

"Come now, sister, there is nothing for either of us to be afraid of in the South. Lord Stark is King Robert's best friend, everyone knows that, just as everyone knows that the father wolf looks after all his pups just as much as the lioness does her cubs. If anyone tried to hurt us while we were away from the North, they wouldn't just have to fight father, Tygg and the Darkport, but Winterfell and Casterly Rock, too."

"You wouldn't need to get them involved," said their brother with a smile as he turned to face the both of them, walking backwards to keep pace with the other boys. "I'd rescue the both of you
myself."

"See? Tygg wouldn't let anything happen to us."

Lyanne smiled towards the brother they shared, one of the few men in the world she was comfortable being around. *Sometimes I wonder if she is just shy, or if she is truly scared of boys. She hardly ever leaves her room between lessons and I haven't seen the inside of those walls since we first came to Winterfell. *Still...I would rather stay in the North than go south, even if we would be there for only a little while."

"Why?" she asked, curious to find where her sister's fear was coming from.

Her sister gave her a small, shy smile. "Well, all my friends are here, in the North, like Sansa and Lady Stark. I like the cold, and really, why would I want to visit the south if everything I want is here, in the North? No, I'm happy here, with everything just as it is."

*If they had my sister's way of thinking, the First Men would have never crossed the Arm of Dorne.*

"Lya, if you act like that...when you're married, you won't ever have the chance to see the south unless your husband takes you there, you won't have the chance to see the Free Cities or the Titan of Braavos, even the Hightower. Don't you want to...live your life a little, before being married?"

Her sister shook her head and Adara blinked in silence.

*My sister...gods, we might have the same body as one another but she could never be more different from me.*

"I'm happy with things just the way they are, Ada."

"I wouldn't think father would let either of you travel to King's Landing even if you wanted to," Tygett smiled. "It's too far and you haven't much reason to go. No, if you want to go south, you'll have to wait till Rodrik goes with Joanna to Casterly Rock, he wants to show off how much she looks like her namesake. Genna says she looks just like her, except Joanna's eyes are grey, not green."

"Silver eyes and golden hair," Adara said with a smile, "Our niece will be one of the most beautiful women in the Seven Kingdoms when she's older, I'm sure of it."

*I wouldn't be surprised if she marries Robb's son, whenever he has one.* She had once thought about putting an end to the back and forth game of small smiles, shy blushes and tender, pecking kisses that was being waged between Alys and Wylla...by luring Robb into her bedchamber and adding him to her list of conquests with a night he would never forget so long as he lived. *Then all I would have to do is not drink my moontea and have him think I might be pregnant. If that happens, he would marry me without a moment's doubt to avoid having a bastard of his own, I would bet, and his father would be proud of him for doing the right thing. Then I would have all the time in the world to make him never want to look at another woman ever again, without having to worry about having my prize stolen from me. Alys and Wylla aren't as clever as they think they are, they've placed the cart before the horse in this case....and Alys thinks she was so subtle!"

*Wylla has tansy poisoning, not that she would ever realize it.*

Once, not long after she had given Theon her maidenhead, she had drank nearly five cups of
moonteain a single day, drinking one cup after she finished a man as she started to learn how to refine her technique and become all the quicker at finishing someone - though, she would be lying if she tried to say she didn't do it for her own enjoyment, too - and had nearly killed herself in the process. At first, it had been a simple headache, but it had quickly turned to paranoia as she saw things that were not there and daggers waiting in the shadows and at the end of her bed, then it began to get even worse when she started to feel as hot as an an oven and then as cold as ice within seconds of eachother, whilst her stomach churned in pain. It had perplexed Maester Luwin, and for a time he was ready to send a raven to the Darkport asking for her family to come to Winterfell, so that they could be there for her incase she took a turn for the worse, but she started to gain her strength again...and after extensive research, the maester had found out that she had poisoned herself by taking far too much moonteain in far too little time, the tansy extract in each cup adding up to a dangerous amount. That's why I only drink one cup a week, now, but he still thinks I might be hurting myself by drinking even that. He's afraid I might never be able to bear children because of how much I've drank over the years...

...I really hope not...I want to be a mother.

I want to have little wolf pups and lion cubs that love me just as much as I love them. I want to hear them say my name and call me mother, I want to see them grow up into strong men and beautiful women with families of their own...I would rather die than birth a dead child.

She swallowed. It was her greatest fear to feel a child kicking inside her, happy and healthy and strong, only for them to die on the way out of her without ever drawing their first breath or knowing the warmth of a mother's smile, or even worse, for them to die in her arms and let her feel the life that should have only just begun slip from her hands. It almost made her cry just thinking about it, but she hoped the gods Old and New would spare her from having to experience such a nightmare. She breathed deeply and reassured herself; her mother had never lost a child, she had difficult births, but Genna had never lost a child to a stillbirth, and neither had Lady Stark or her cousin Cersei. They've never lost one, so why would I? I'm healthy, with good hips, so I should be fine...but gods, it scares me all the same.

"Seven hells! Do you see how big that print is?" yelled one of Robb's friends in surprise, snapping her out of her thoughts.

She urged her horse onwards to see in person as the other ladies shied away. "That's big for a stag's print," said another, a boy a little younger than Bran from one of the clans in the mountains. "I've never seen one that big."

The other boys looked at him in disbelief, Robb shaking his head with an amused smile, without saying a word.

"It's not a stag's print," the Smalljon Umber crouched down besides it to take a closer look. "A stag has two toes, this has four and claws, too."

"Aye, that's no stag," nodded Donnel in agreement. "Wolf, by the looks of it."

Adara looked down from her horse. It was a dog's track, definitely, but it was far larger than any footprint she had seen the largest dogs in Winterfell make, without a doubt. ...that animal must be as big as my horse.

Dacey walked over, bow in hands and eagerly followed by Arya. "What kind of wolf makes a print that big?"
"A direwolf!" said the young Stark girl instinctively. "A direwolf is big enough to make that. They were as big as horses."

Everything fell silent for far too long to be comfortable. It made sense, what else could have made a track that large?

Everyone fell silent for far too long for it to have been comfortable. It makes sense...

"A direwolf hasn't been seen south of the Wall for two hundred years," said Robb with amazement and a growing smile. "If it's out there, I want to find it."

"Direwolves are dangerous, Robb," cautioned the Captain of the Household Guard, Jory Cassel. "They went with their masters into battle and could rip armed and armoured men apart. My lord, we should return with the ladies to the castle as soon as possible and bring more men to drive it away, before it attacks anyone."

Robb stared at the Jory in shock. "You mean you would hunt it down! The direwolf is our symbol, a symbol of the North!" He looked straight to his father as he spoke. "Father, if grandfather Rickard found out about a direwolf in the woods, what would he have done?"

He would have brought it back to Winterfell and paraded it through the streets so everyone could see it.

Jon joined his brother in trying to convince their father. "If we could catch it, we would have a direwolf again, just like all the old Starks did. We write runes on our walls, we can speak the Old Tongue if we want, we have everything the old Kingdom had and more, why not the wolves, too?"

"If there's a real direwolf in these woods, I want to see it," said Dacey with a smile. "Just once. There are bears in every wood in Westeros, but a direwolf...they're special."

Eddard turned to Jory and spoke with his lordly voice. "Jory, take the ladies back to Winterfell. We will finish the hunt, and if we can't find the direwolf you will bring Farlen and his hounds so we might run it off."

"Yes, my lord," was all the captain replied as he bowed before his liege lord and left to carry out his bidding, ordering the bulk of his men to mount their steeds and to form up alongside Sansa and her ladies. Adara waved to her brother with a smile...and blew a kiss to Theon to keep him warm while she was away, then she turned her horse about and rode alongside her friends.

"And you, Arya," insisted her father.

"But I want to hunt with you!"

Her father crouched down to look Arya in the eyes and smiled, his lordly voice and face replaced by that of a loving father. "There'll be other hunts, Arya. I promise, I'll never stop you from going on them when you are older, but a direwolf is dangerous, too dangerous for you to stay here."

Dacey smiled at Arya. "You're father's right. There'll be other hunts, and a direwolf is too dangerous for you when you're still so young," she laughed. "Even I wouldn't try to find one when I was your age."
"But...the hunt? The wolf? If you drive it away, I'll never get a chance to see one."

Dacey looked to Eddard and said, "If I stay by her...she should be fine. I can show her how to hunt without getting herself hurt. I promise, I'll keep her safe."

Eddard looked at Dacey for a moment before sighing, smiling and nodding. He mussed Arya's hair as she laughed. "Not a word of this to your mother."

"Not a word!" swore Arya with a smile, taking her place besides Dacey again, both of them holding their bows almost the exact same way. Sansa waved to Domeric, Alys waved to Robb and all the other ladies followed by waving to the men they were interested in, but sister simply did what was proper and waved to everyone for as little as she could before putting her arm at her side again. ...I should't be surprised by her, but I am. How could a woman be so afraid of boys? She sighed as looked out of the forest, across the green plains, covered with a light, patchy snow that had already started to melt, leading her horse onwards.

"My sister is hopeless," she muttered to Sansa sadly. "I wouldn't be surprised if she would rather kill herself than get married."

"Give her time," said the Stark girl with a smile, as sure of what she was saying as ever. "She'll find someone who makes her happy eventually."

"How can you be so sure? She is afraid of boys."

Sansa looked at her as she began, "Remember when Rickon was scared of spiders?"

"He screamed till your mother arrived, I remember." Who wouldn't remember that? He sounded like he was being murdered.

"Remember that a week later, we saw him playing in the godswood and he reached into the tree's eye, pulled out a handful of spiders and ate them?"

Adara laughed. He fisted a handful of them into his mouth as if they were sweets! I don't think he'll ever do that again, gods, he licked the tree's sap to get the taste out of his mouth.

Sansa continued with another smile, "You never know what might happen tomorrow. For all we know, she might fall in love with someone at dinner tonight or tomorrow. I wouldn't worry about her, she'll find someone who makes her happy eventually."

"I hope so, Sansa, I really hope so..." she sighed...and then there was the shouting of men and the sounds of a dozen bows shooting off in fast succession, one right after another and a shout of pain and the loudest, deepest bark she had ever heard a wolf make. Oh gods...Tygg!

She spun her horse around as fast as she could, stabbing her heels into its side, but Sansa was already ahead.

Jory yelled as he drew his sword, "My lady! Come back! We cannot protect -"

"Protect me by following, damn you!" Sansa shouted back in open defiance, urging her horse into a gallop back to the clearing where they had been only a few minutes before. Adara followed as quickly as she could, hoping and praying nothing had gone wrong with the hunt, that her brother was safe and sound, that Theon was alive and well and utterly unharmed.
The clearing was utter chaos; dead game animals littered the ground like fallen leaves, sent flying from the tattered remains of Brandon's second game bag, the iron stench of blood rising from everywhere around her and filling the air with its metal taste. A stag lay dead, no more than twenty feet from where she had been sat upon her horse before, arrows rising from its side from head to haunch like a meadow of blooming wildflowers as blood still spurt from where its throat had once been. Theon nursed a broken nose as blood streamed down his face, Robb glanced at his broken knuckles as they started to swell, looking towards the Greyjoy with disdain and almost growling at him as he flexed his fingers again.

"If you had shot the direwolf, I would have shot you," he said with a low, angry voice. "And if you had hit Arya, I would beat you to death with my own hands."

"Easy, Robb, he didn't mean to, he just tried to keep her safe, is all," soothed his bastard brother. "Everything came out fine, anyway...other than your hand and his face."

"Is she going to be alright?" asked Arya from behind her.

Adara turned in her saddle...and a chill went down her spine as she saw it.

The direwolf, as grey as a storm cloud and so tall it looked her in the eye as blood flowed from a piece of broken antler buried in the shoulder.

_Gods_...

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**End of Part 12!**

Chapter End Notes

Now, just to get it out of the way, we'll have a PoV of what happened in the clearing while Adara and Sansa weren't there, so you can see exactly what happened

Anyway, as you can see, Adara is far more clever than she appears to be, that's for sure. She really looks up to the two main sides of the family, the Starks and the Lannisters, and is sort of a hybrid of both. She would do anything for her family, and she would say she has the cunning of a Lannister, too, and she utterly adores Cersei Lannister. She's everything Adara wants to be in the world - and by thinking that of her and letting Cersei know it, well, it means she only ever sees the good parts of Cersei and not the bad. The Darkstarks generally maintain good relations with their Lannister cousins, just as they do with Winterfell, and all of the Darkstark children have met their Lannister cousins, barring Benjen and Joanna Darkstark, the two youngest members and the children of the Darkstark heir. Tywin is happy to keep the friendship good ("There's a tool for every task, and a task for every tool.") because of things like the Greyjoy Rebellion and before that, the Reyne-Tarbeck one where the Darkstarks were ready to come aid the Lannisters if needed. Tygett Darkstark is...well, it should be quite clear who he is named for, and he looks up to Jaime in the same way that Adara looks up to Cersei.
Though he still doesn't know about why Jaime killed Aerys, Tygg simply believes it was for a good reason and that Jaime shouldn't be blamed for killing a raving, tyrannical madman. Adara hopes to be just as successful as Cersei, but she also wants to keep her family as safe as possible, so she's hoping to wed Theon Greyjoy so as to remove the only threat to her family; she does have a soft side for Theon for when he's at his best, her cunning side is definitely encouraging the relationship to proceed. She's taking control of his love life because of what Cersei said, though Adara might be taking it in a different direction than Cersei had meant by using her ladyparts as a tool of pleasure rather than a weapon of seduction.
Bran II

Chapter Notes

Right, so after the combined delays of losing the part, having to finish the Greystark family tree and almost losing my home, here we are again! The first part isn't exactly as I originally wrote it and so might be a little rough around the edges, but after that point things should start clearing themselves up :D

And, uh, I slipped a small reference into the first paragraph :p

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Bran smiled as his body walked along the forest floor, all the while his mind was in the eagle soaring in the skies high above, looking down on his body and all his friends as he circled around, watching for any sign of more prey to hunt, great or small, and most importantly, looking for the direwolf and the stag. He could hear the voices of all those talking around him, but it was like hearing them speaking from the bottom of a pond, almost every word distorted and utterly unintelligible, though a few words he knew well - names of his friends and places he had been to - sometimes bled through, though it was impossible to make any sense of what they were talking about. Only wargs with years of experience could be in both bodies at the same time, and even then they couldn't pay as much attention to the happenings around them as those who weren't trying to be in both...but the very best wargs could be in more than one body at once, influencing and guiding all of their skins at the same time, but only a handful of wargs with that level of power were born in every generation, even counting the ones beyond the Wall. But legend had it that greenseers could assume direct control over all of their skins at the same time, as if they were as much a part of their body as their arms and legs were. But that's just a legend Old Nan told me. I asked a Green Man about it and he said that only the Children of the Forest could do it. Goldwing allowed him to take full control of his body, so he brought him lower, through the thick green leaves to rest upon a branch, his sharp talons digging into the bark as he looked around again, hoping to get a better look...and saw Robb walk over to his side.

"Bran," he said, his voice half muddled and half clear.

He blinked as he felt his brother's hand upon his shoulder, leaving Goldwing's body and returning to his own. His brother smiled and asked, "Did you see anything?"

Bran shook his head, looking past his brother to see his bird looking straight towards him before turning his eyes back to Robb. "No, there are too many trees."

"That didn't seem to stop you from catching everything in the forest," said Jon from across the clearing. "The stag and the direwolf are probably the only things in the woods other than us, now."

He laughed with his brothers, smiling. He loved to go hunting, especially with Goldwing at his side and friends all around. It was never much of a challenge for anyone blessed enough to be a warg to bring back plenty of game, even if they rarely ever used the ability and had little experience with it. But the more I practice, the better I get. Mother doesn't like me warging into Goldwing, but I don't
He hoped for the chance to show King Robert and his family how good he was with the lance, the sword and his power to warg, but more than anything else in the world he dreamed of being the squire to the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, Ser Barristan Selmy himself. There was no doubt in his heart that Ser Barristan Selmy was the greatest warrior of their age and the only member of Aerys’ Kingsguard to swear fealty to King Robert at the end of the rebellion, he was the living legend who had forever put an end to the Blackfyre threat upon the Stepstones after slaying Maelys Blackfyre in single combat, but that was only one of his many achievements. Every day and night he prayed to gods Old and New for King Robert to come to Winterfell and let him have that opportunity to prove himself; his father had offered to find him a good marriage and give him some land to build a keep on, but he had no interest in them, so he turned them down and focused all the more on his dream of being the very first Stark to wear a white cloak.

He could even be the first member of the Kingsguard to not be a knight, too, since he was unsure if he wanted to wear the title or not. Like most Northmen, he knew that many of the knights in the south were just cold blooded killers like the Ironborn except with a ser before their name, like Ser Amory Lorch and Ser Gregor Clegane, both of whom had butchered innocent and defenseless children when King's Landing fell...not just the royal children, but the families of the Targaryen's own household guard and servants who had been in the Red Keep when it had been sacked. Knights are meant to be honorable and they swear to defend the weak and the helpless, but...Ser Gregor killed a baby! Not all knights are like him though...right? Ser Barristan would never hurt a baby! No true knight would ever hurt a baby, even if they were ordered to!

"Be careful," said their father as he looked around, holding his own hunting bow as he did. "If we find the direwolf, you must stay away from it and make no sudden moves, else it might think you are a threat."

Theon walked by, holding his own bow tight and having his other hand close to the quiver he kept at his hip. The Ironborn had few things he could be proud of, but one of them was his skills with a bow, since he was easily the best archer Bran had ever seen, a better shot than anyone in the castle's garrison, rarely ever missing even though he shot twice as fast as anyone else in the castle, letting his arrows loose without even taking any time to aim first. I hope I get that good with the bow one day, even though I don't have to be. He was good with a sword, better with a lance and terrible with a bow, since it seemed his arrows had a will all of their own, but being a warg and having an eagle meant he never had to hunt with a bow and the armies of the North preferred to use crossbows, so there was no real need for him to know how to shoot a bow well other than for the prestige of it...but being a good archer would make sure he got his place in the Kingsguard.

"How dangerous could a grown direwolf be," asked Theon, "It would only take one arrow to the throat to bring it down."

His father looked at Theon with stern eyes, just as all those with direwolves above their hearts glared at him with disgust. "A direwolf only a year old could kill a dozen men in armor, Theon. The Kings in the North used to ride into battle with their direwolves besides them and even without armor they could take dozens of arrows before falling."
Theon was silent and unwilling to reply, knowing that all eyes were on him and that whatever he said next would probably be held against him if he made even the slightest mistake. Instead he sighed and looked towards the floor, kicking a rock on the ground as he did and instantly Bran couldn't help but feel sorry for the Greyjoy heir. Here he was, miles away from home, with no friends nor family around him and surrounded by a people who saw him as a nuisance, all but Adara, who loved him...and everyone else at Winterfell, or so it seemed. He would try and run away if he ever had the chance, but the wargs would find him before he could get too far away. While most of the other wards went back to their homes for feasts, namedays and other such things like that, Theon would only be allowed to leave Winterfell once his father had died, so that he could return to the Iron Islands and take over, but Bran thought they might have been making a mistake by not being friends with him; when Theon inherited the Iron Islands from his father, he would remember everything that had ever happened to him at Winterfell...and who knew how he would act then.

"We should start being nicer to Theon," he said to Robb as they walked along. "He doesn't have any brothers anymore."

"He is all alone, isn't he?" Robb looked towards the Greyjoy and saw him standing in the center of the group all on his own before sighing. "I'll give him a chance..."

Robb walked over to Theon on the far side of the group, muttering something under his breath as Arya laughed at one of Dacey's japes. His sister and Dacey Mormont were as utterly inseparable as Robb and Jon, never being far from one another except for the times when Arya managed to sneak her way out of the castle and into the city, but even then it was Dacey who brought her back more often than not. She knew exactly how Arya thought and where she wanted to go, so whilst it could take the guards of Winterfell and the Snowcloaks from sunrise to sunset to track her down, even with the help their wargs, Dacey could usually find her in an hour; but she would spend the entire day with her wandering the city before bringing her back in time for dinner. Everyone in the castle knew that Arya wanted to visit Bear Island one day and meet of all of Dacey's sisters and nieces, to go there whenever her friend went back for one of her family's feasts, but Catelyn was reluctant to let her go, even though she was friends with Jorah's wife, simply because there was the chance that Arya wouldn't want to go home again afterwards and would ask to stay there as a ward. That wouldn't happen, though, since Arya would follow Dacey back to Winterfell.

He smiled towards his sister and her friend...and then he felt Goldwing nudge at his mind with concern, seeing it a second before he had the chance to see it for himself.

Then there it was.

The direwolf was standing only a few feet from his sister, as grey as a summer's storm and as large as a horse, yet he was sure he was the only one to have noticed it. The direwolf sniffed the air and looked around with concern, seeing him and all the others as they walked along before turning around to flee...and he smiled and reached out, not with the force that a warg might use to take an animal, or the familiar way he might slip into Goldwing, but with a slower, gentler approach like the one a man might use to calm his horse or a mother trying to lull her babe to sleep. Instantly, the direwolf looked towards the group, towards him and he felt no anger or hatred for his intrusion, but fear of being hurt by him and all the others, fear of being hunted by those things that were meant to be dead but weren't, fear for the pups she was carrying inside her. Don't be afraid, he soothed, trying to reassure the shewolf. We won't hurt you.

The direwolf took a hesitant step towards them as he felt her fear being replaced by the hope that he and all the others could help keep her safe, or at the very least that they would do no harm to her. He heard his sister gasp when she noticed the direwolf, Dacey pulling her sister back to keep her
safe...and then he felt another rush of concern go through the direwolf as she pushed him away and made everything a blur.

He heard Theon shout a word and saw him go through the movements of nocking an arrow, only for Robb to swing at him with all the strength he had as the bow sang its deadly tune. He heard the direwolf yelp from the attack, only to feel no pain as it flew past harmlessly.

Then he heard a rush of hooves as something big and brown charged past him, an antler ripping into the game bag he had slung across his shoulder, tearing the cloth apart and scattering the contents in an explosion of dead game as his mind rushed back to the foreground, his eyes focusing again...as the stag charged across the clearing towards the direwolf, forced forwards by all the momentum of its movement.

An arrow with a fletching of white and grey shot into its haunch...and then there was the music of half a hundred bows setting half a hundred arrows loose at the same time, carrying the colors of every house in the North as they punched into the stag's side, some few slipping through the gaps between ribs to hit the organs within, others having so much force behind them as to break bones. But the stag's momentum carried it forward even as its legs began to give way and as crimson tears poured from its wounds, giving the direwolf - slowed by the swell of its middle and the weight of those within - no time to escape the path of its charge...but enough to ensure its pups would live.

He felt a tingle of pain against his shoulder as a resounding crack and a yelp echoed through the woods, the stag's left antler shattering from the force of its charge as it collapse to the ground against the direwolf. The shewolf snarled furiously at the dying stag and in the time it took for his heart to beat again he saw her lock her jaws around the stag's throat and rip it out in a rush of blood so hot it steamed in the cold air, the smell so strong it filled the entire clearing and the flavor so powerful he could taste nothing but iron washing over his mouth for just a second as the bond between man and wolf broke completely.

Theon snatched at his nose as blood began to stream down his face from where Robb had struck him as all the women of their party returned to them, led by his eldest sister and Jory, who drew his sword as he looked around to make sure there was no longer a threat.

"If you had shot the direwolf, I would have shot you," Robb said as his pack closed in around him, "And if you had hit Arya, I would beat you to death with my own hands."

"Easy, Robb, he didn't mean to, he just tried to keep her safe, is all," said their bastard brother, trying to calm the two of them down before more harm was done. "Everything came out fine, anyway...other than your hand and his face."

Arya slowly stepped towards the direwolf even as Dacey quietly tried to keep her away from it for her own good, but his sister's wide smile turned to a look of concern as she saw the she wolf's blood matted fur, and she looked directly to their father. "...Is she going to be alright?"

All eyes turned towards the Lord of Winterfell as conversations died and everyone waited for his next order...and it was as clear as a sunny summer's day what he was thinking about in that moment of silence - what to do with the wolf. A direwolf was one of the most dangerous animals in the world when cornered or angered, as deadly as a snowbear and twice as fast and even more so when inside a building; if she chose to attack them after they brought her under their roof, she could very well kill or maim someone before they would even have a chance to stop her...but on the other hand, she was wounded, pregnant and tired from her journeys and day without food, so she stood no chance of making it past the week's' end on her own.
Finally, he sighed and drew his dagger as he walked towards the direwolf and as Bran's blood turned to ice water at the sight of the bared steel. "Arya, stay where you are. Jory, come here."

"Don't hurt her!" screamed his sister as Robb and Jon rushed over to try and reason with him...then both of his brothers stopped down in their tracks when Eddard unclasped his cloak and cut two pieces from the thick cloth.

"I would never hurt her," said their father with a smile as the shewolf licked his fingers. "She's of the North."

Jory took one of the two pieces of cloth from his father's hands and pressed it against the direwolf's shoulder, just below where the antler had embedded itself. The men of the household guard gathered around the two of them, ready to keep their lord safe if the direwolf reacted badly, but he could hear some of them whispering amongst themselves about how the direwolf was the first to be seen in the North in centuries and how it might've been killed had it not been for their hunting party shooting the stag down. With his back turned to his sons, Eddard placed his hand on the part of the antler closest to the wolf's body, flexing his fingers to be sure his grip was good and would not slip on the smooth antler or in the warm blood...the white and grey arrows of his quiver jostling around for empty space where there had once been another.

Then, with a single fast motion, Eddard pulled the antler out and the shewolf cried out from the pain, louder than the largest of Winterfell's dogs or any wolf he had ever heard howling in the night before. The grey cloth of his father's cloak turned a bright scarlet as it soaked up the spurting blood, but after a minute of utter silence where no one so much as uttered a single word, too busy watching the wolf and uttering silent prayers to the gods, Jory took the bloodsoaked rag away and Ned wrapped the second rag around the direwolf's shoulder as best as he could, trying to keep the dirt out of the wound and to slow or stop the bleeding until they could get back to Winterfell. Every man who had ever went to war learnt how to bandage a wound, most even learning how to clean one and how to burn it shut without doing more harm than good, or how to mend their own weapons and armor and make them last long enough for a blacksmith to be able to do proper repairs, and his father was no exception, a youth spent in the mountains of the Vale with Robert Baratheon before going on campaign in the Rebellion had seen to that. His father threw the antler to the side, and no one paid any attention to the still warm body of the stag.

The shewolf slowly limped towards Eddard's side, growing more confident with every step it took till its steps became something close to normalcy, only a small patch of red in the center of the bandage. Robb, Jon and all the others smiled and walked over, taking a closer look, and he couldn't help himself but to follow them. She was huge, not just with pups but with muscle, too, as big as a full grown pony and heavier, too, with great golden eyes that looked at everyone with curiosity...and no small amount of caution, he knew. She knows we mean her no harm. Just as he had reached into her mind and felt her feelings of fear and apprehension when he tried to comfort her with his powers, she had been able to learn that he and all the others would never hurt her, so long as she didn't harm any of them. Robb reached out to touch her, to make sure what his eyes were telling him was true...and she licked his fingers, just as she did to Jon, Sansa and everyone else who had Stark blood coursing through their veins.

Only Lyra Greystark stayed away, the youngest of all those who had gone riding, still mounted on her horse, looking down on the direwolf with sad eyes and an obvious desire to join all the others besides the direwolf, but she wouldn't let herself dismount from her horse - even though no one would have stopped her or scolded her for wanting to join the others besides the wolf. The Greystarks were the oldest of the Stark branches and before their treason they had been held in the
highest esteem, the very image of how a cadet branch should act towards their father family and liege lords; they had marched beneath the direwolf banners on a hundred different battlefields and at a thousand more no longer remembered by men, but that made their treason all the worse...they had been the most trusted ally of Winterfell, and they had turned their back on their family in their lust for power. They had betrayed their own family, they had betrayed the pack and lost almost everything because of it. They had been stripped of their ancestral seat of Wolf's Den and their main source of income in its silvermines, they had their vaults plundered of what wealth they had stored away, their lands were so heavily reduced that in the end they were left only with the poorest part on which to rebuild themselves, the grown men of the family had been put to the sword before the eyes of a wierwood tree and even their maidens had been taken as brides for the victorious lords, to ensure they would never be able to take up swords against the lords around them for generations. With so much of their family killed in the war, only children were left to take the Greystark name, and the sons of the family were divided amongst the lords of the North and taken as wards, with few expecting the family to last more than a few generations before it would die out...and yet, despite all the odds, despite the efforts of old enemies and harsh winters, the Greystarks had persevered.

They had used the prestige of their noble title - battered and shamed as it might have been, they were still a lordly house even if in name only - as leverage with the younger and wealthier families of the North and South, finding those newly entitled houses and great merchants who were desperate for the renown that came from being married into a family with a long and glorious history, such as the Freys, using the wealth of silver and gold they received as dowries from the families of their brides and the meagre coin that had been left to them by Winterfell, they built a small keep, half in stone and half in wood, that would one day grow into the castle of Greystone, a small but formidable fortress that was like Winterfell made small, with the same architecture, the same layout and even the stone carrying the very same color as the blocks that made up the walls of the Northern capital...but the greatest loss of theirs was one that could not be fixed so easily - their loss of honor and their trustworthiness in the eyes of many Northern lords...and it was this shame that the Greystarks truly took to heart.

In days long past, their words had been Forever Faithful, referring to how they were always the first to come to Winterfell's side and had always come to help their close kin, in matters great and small, never being far from the Starks of Winterfell when in battle, with a Greystark even being named regent on a dozen occasions when the King in the North was too young to rule on his own...but after their treasonous act, those few surviving sons who had been spared from the slaughter were taught to feel nothing but shame for what the rest of their family had done, made to forever hate their brother, s uncles and fathers for the crime they had committed against their king and kin, telling the young boys that they had brought their fate upon themselves, that it was no one's fault but their own for losing so much and that they should be grateful for still having their lives. Though the lords of the North hadn't realized it, their words had sunk in far more deeply than they could have ever imagined, so much so that it was the Greystarks who told them to their children, now. Old Nan says the first thing a Greystark learns is how to feel guilty...we shouldn't let them feel like that, though. It was over a thousand years ago!

Nowadays, the Greystarks dedicated themselves to their pursuit of redemption, never doing anything that might jeopardize their honor, trying to do anything they could to remove the "taint" that made many lords ask for larger dowries and offer less for their own maidens, all whilst expecting the Greystarks to do more and be given less for their efforts, but Bran knew his father wanted to see an end to it...but bran knew his father wanted to see an end to it, but he couldn't force the lords of the North to forgive them...and nor could he force the Greystarks to forgive themselves for what their ancestors had done centuries before, since it was they who passed their burden from one generation to the next, not the lords of the North.
Lyra fidgeted in her saddle as the direwolf looked towards her, only for the Greystark girl to turn away with tears in her eyes and lead her horse away from the group, going towards where the men of the household guard were waiting with the steeds of those who had dismounted to hunt. The shewolf turned towards Brandon, looking at him as if to ask why Lyra had left, but the answer was clear enough to him - she didn't think herself worthy to touch a true direwolf, not after the Greystarks slew four of them in a rebellion that pitted cousin against cousin, even for the direwolves that followed their masters into battle. He sighed to himself, Goldwing returning to his vambrace as he raised his arm for him.

"We best turn back to Winterfell," said his father as he checked the shewolf's wound for the last time before turning to Jory again. "Jory, ride ahead of us and tell Farlen to find room for her and her pups in the kennels, it won't be long before she whelps."

"Aye, my lord," he replied without a moment's hesitation, turning to leave and only managing a few steps before his lord father continued with a softer tone than before.

"...and try to make sure my wife doesn't learn of this just yet. I will tell her myself after we return."

"Only the gods know what mother will do when she finds out about this..." muttered Robb to Jon.

"She won't be happy," said Sansa, who was crouched down besides the direwolf and ruffing its neck, unafraid of getting her clothes dirty. "...but a direwolf hasn't been seen in the North for centuries. Maybe we were meant to find her?"

"I saw one of the Green Men in the city, maybe we could ask him if he's still there?" suggested Arya with an excited grin as they started to leave the clearing, Domeric helping his eldest sister back onto her horse and a few of the attendants with them gathering up the stag's body for that night's dinner.

*I lost half a bag of game...but I still have more than anyone else!*

Their father nodded with another smile in silent agreement as he led the way out of the forest, walking slower than he normally would to make it easier for the wounded direwolf to keep up with him...and with their steeds not far from view, Artos Swampstark - who had been quiet for most of the hunt, trying to listen out for anything he could catch with his net and spear - asked a question Bran hadn't even thought of in all the excitement.

"How did she get south of the Wall? There can't be a hole in it, the builders would've found it and filled it in before it got big enough for her to get through, and she couldn't have swum round with pups inside her...so, how did she get here?"

Jon paused for a moment's thought as he climbed atop his horse. "She mustn't have had the pups before she came south of the Wall, else she would've never made it here...that means..."

"There must be a male south of the Wall, too, somewhere, but I doubt we'd ever find him," said Donnel as he looked around from horseback, sliding the bow beneath his shoulder and around his chest. "Direwolves can't be found if they don't want to be."

"What would a male direwolf have to do with her," asked Bran, not seeing what a male direwolf had to do with the female being pregnant. "Direwolves can't get married."

Robb and a dozen of the other boys and even some of the ladies burst into laughter, with even his father giving a small chuckle at his innocent words.
"I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you where babies from from, Bran," said his father as Bran rode alongside him, Goldwing shooting back into the sky to follow them from the air...and by the time they reached the gates of Winterfell, he wished he had never asked.

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End of part 13!

Chapter End Notes

So, after a horribly long wait, it's finally here! It would've taken even longer, but I think changing PoV at this point would be a good idea, that way we can see the return to Winterfell from someone else's perspective, like maybe...Eddard's!

Anyway, we see now exactly what happened in the clearing in the brief moment Sansa and all her friends were away - the shewolf arrived, and though she was cautious and afraid of them, Bran managed to use his powers as a warg to calm her down by "half" warging into her and showing her that he nor any of the others would do her any harm. Think animal-empathy instead of animal-control - it's a more advanced technique, but it's the best way to help get an animal accustomed to one's presence, so, reusing the car analogy from before, it's basically chatting with the car's owner first so that they have an idea of who you are before you try and hop into the driver's seat.

Bran's aspirations to join the Kingsguard are definitely alive and well in this timeline, perhaps even stronger than they were in canon, since he dreams of being not just the first Stark to wear a white cloak, but to be the first warg, too. He enjoys going on hunts with his family and friends, and he's really hoping that being such a good hunter will give him something in common with the king, but he certainly makes full use of Goldwing's abilities when hunting, that's for sure Hunters and trackers with the ability to warg are actually relatively common in the North, with most settlements being less than ten day's travel from one of them, since it doesn't require much in the name of natural talent to control something like a bird and even less to influence it enough to make it do one's bidding without taking manual control, but without the ability to take control and see through the eyes of the bird they hunt with, they're much less useful in times of war...and of course, Bran dreams so much of being in the Kingsguard that he really isn't that interested in having lands of his own, and though he turned the offer down, Eddard is happy to find him somewhere nice in the North if he ever changes his mind on what he wants to do with his life.

Moving on, we see why Theon got his nose broke - he genuinely thought he was helping to keep Arya safe, so he took the shot by instinct and without forethought, thinking that the others would thank him for driving the direwolf off...and well, it didn't go as planned.

And of course, there was never a discussion about whether to bring the direwolf back to Winterfell - a hesitation, yes, but no discussion, for what I am sure are obvious reasons :p

And we see more about the Greystarks - while there are many lords in the North who
try to use what the Greystarks did in the past as a way to get more out of them and give them less, one of their biggest problems is that the Greystarks haven't been able to forgive themselves for what happened all those years ago, and though Eddard Stark could order the lords of the North to treat them as an equal, he can't order the Greystarks to forgive themselves for the actions of their ancestors...and this is the main source of tension between the main part of the family and their cousins in the Company of the Wolf - the one group believes there is still much more work to be done for them to be forgiven, if they are ever forgiven for what they did, and the other has forgiven themselves and tried to move past it, saying that they've paid a price in blood in hundreds of battles since then, and though they might never have the station they once had in the North, they can at least try to move past their sins and do something with their lives other than always trying to be forgiven for it.

...and then there is the mystery as to how a pregnant direwolf ended up south of the Wall... ;)

Oh, and Bran gets the "talk."

Next part will cover the arrival at Winterfell with an Eddard Stark PoV... and we'll be starting from the moment they enter the gates :D
Eddard II

Chapter Notes

This took a while, but I'm very happy to see it done! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Winterfell, a few hours later...

Eddard smiled as the shewolf walked alongside his horse at a comfortable pace, never once allowing herself to limp or to rest, and not once was he afraid she would collapse from her wound - even a young direwolf could live through the harshest of winters, times when the sun would rise for only a few hours before setting again, when all prey was scarce and when water froze as hard as steel. But as she trod alongside him, careful to avoid anything that could knock her middle, it left him wondering where her pack was. All of the books in the Den mention them travelling in packs of ten to twenty till they started to disappear...but even then, no direwolf ever stayed on its own without a pack, yet alone a shewolf carrying pups inside her. In the days of Torrhen Beefking, they had prowled the lands in great packs, some so great as to have more direwolves than there were in the kennels of Winterfell, being so dangerous in their numbers that even the Lord of Winterfell needed to wear all of his armour and go with a strong escort when going hunting if they were hungry, but so long as they had food of their own in the woods, they left the huntsmen and lumberjacks who entered their territory alone...though hunting dogs and the like were often less fortunate, as their shredded remains often showed. Even bears weren't safe from them, since even a single direwolf was often a match for a strong bear...and more so, if he managed to sneak up on them, as they often could.

From the very moment he had first seen her wounded, he knew that it would be the right thing to bring her back to the city and let her wounds heal and let her stay if she wanted to. It's what my father would have done...if a shewolf had been seen near Winterfell, he would have had every man in the castle riding out to find her, and he would've given a lordship to whoever managed to bring her back to the castle. He could still remember the day his elder brother - who was no older than Robb at the time - pleaded with their father to let him take a hundred men beyond the Wall to try and find as many direwolves as he could, even to try and bring them back to the North once more so that the Starks would never have to be without their most trusted companions ever again, but his father had convinced him that it was too dangerous...but he knew his father had been tempted to let him go, and the ten thousand gold dragons he had gifted to the Night's Watch said he made an attempt to have them brought to Winterfell...but the search had been fruitless. His sister had even prayed before the wierwood tree to be given a direwolf pup when she was only five namedays old, but the tree had been silent and not even the Green Men could say if they would ever see a direwolf again, yet alone have them as pets just as their ancestors had.

Some thought that they could even die out entirely and join the children of the forest in the world of legend, never to be seen again...but here she was, walking alongside him and as real as the horse he rode upon.

It was like a dream come true for any Stark...and it had been so close to turning into a nightmare. Had the stag managed to go a few feet further before being hit or if the direwolf had been only a few
inches to the side...he would've had to bury her. But his eldest daughter was right - a direwolf hadn't been seen in the North in nearly two hundred years, and this one had instantly accepted all of them without a moment's hesitation, treating all of them well and following them without second thought, though Eddard couldn't shake the feeling that the shewolf already knew where she was going, but that probably had something to do with Bran. His son was a powerful warg, and growing more powerful with every day that passed, or so it seemed, since his son had told him that he had calmed the shewolf down when it had first met them. I'm only afraid that being a warg might make the Faith try to stop him from earning a white cloak. He could never be prouder of his son and his dreams to become a member of the Kingsguard, there truly was no more honorable or righteous a thing to aspire for...but a white cloak was an enormous responsibility and carried a heavy price he had made as clear as he could to his young, hopeful son. If he succeeds...he will never know what it is like to hold a son in his arms, or to see them grow into men with sons of their own. He'll never see his daughters take their first steps, or see them marry and fall in love...if he doesn't want such things, so be it, but I would not have any son of mine take such a duty without knowing what it means first. Bran had been silent ever since he had learnt all there was to know about where children came from, and Arya - who he had called to the front so that she could hear the talk too, with Dacey explaining the parts that he had less knowledge about - had been more curious about the thing than her brother was, asking whatever question came to mind before going to Adara's side to learn more. I only hope she doesn't get any ideas from her...

Since they had left the depths of the forest and entered the countryside proper, the day had taken a turn for the better, with the sun beaming down on them from high above and making the lands of the North as hot as they could ever be, with what little snow and frost there was from the night before melting and making the ground as soft and as muddy as the banks of the Trident had been in the final battle of the rebellion...but fortunately, his ancestors from two centuries before had used their growing wealth to start work on a series of roads to connect the growing settlements of the North together, offering prisoners such as thieves and poachers a chance to work on the roads and earn their keep with honest work instead of being punished or having to take the black. It took years of hard labor, but when they were done they were allowed a chance to go back into normal life, their crimes forgiven, and the result was the spider's web of cobblestone roads that weaved through the land, connecting the major cities and castles together - though most towns and villages had dirt paths instead of proper roads, since they either didn't exist when the roads were first built or weren't important enough to counter the cost - though the most important of them all was the Whiteroad that joined Winterfell to White Harbor...and though all the roads helped trade flow more smoothly, their purpose in winter was just as important. In the darkness of winter, when the snows fall thick and heavy, it is almost impossible for even the best scouts or wargs to find their bearings in the vast lands of the North, but the roads of the North meant that so long as they could find a road and follow it they were bound to find a place to stay the night...though the dirt paths were not so useful, since they could utterly disappear beneath the snows or be washed away by a thunderstorm in spring.

We're not the only ones to have so many roads, though. The Lannisters have the most out of anyone and Dorne the least.

The Lannisters - always looking for more ways to increase their own power inside the Westerlands to stave off their ambitious vassals, whether by arms or by wealth - had seen how the Starks had put those who broke the laws of the land to work and did the same, completely discarding the idea of executioners, torturers and dungeons in favor of sending all the criminals of the Westerlands into the depths of the gold mines to toil from dawn til dusk, never allowed to see the sun or the stars again for the rest of their lives, they slept, ate and died in the mines for the wealth of the Westerlands. Others were worked to death building the enormous stretches of brickroad that made the Westerlands easily the best place to do trade in the Seven Kingdoms...but the work was so brutal and backbreaking that the Faith called it slavery and condemned those lords who practiced it, and in the end the Lannisters
had gone back to the old ways in the days of Tytos Lannister and it had finally died out entirely under Tywin Lannister himself, simply because the other lords of the Westerlands were more dependent on such incomes than house Lannister, so, by depriving his subordinate lords of such a source of labor, he weakened any families who might dare to defy his will.

*He tries to keep his enemies weak, so that none of them will ever have the strength to rebel against him ever again...my father would have done the same thing in his place.*

Without saying a single word as he raised his hand, he waved for Robb to come to the front...and his eldest son led his horse with only one hand upon the reins, nursing the other against his chest as if trying to hide what he had done and clearly afraid of whatever punishment he might be given.

"Father, I -"

"Once Maester Luwin has seen to your hand, you will go to the kitchens and help the servants whenever you are done with lessons for the day," he said with a calm but stern voice. "You'll do this for a fortnight, even if your hand is better before then."

Robb looked down to the ground sadly before meeting his father's gaze and nodding. "Yes, father...I just wanted to stop him from shooting. He could've hit Arya."

"He could have, and you were right to try and stop him, but you could have pushed him instead of hitting him, just as you could have tried to tell him to stop."

*And if he hit Arya I would have dealt with him myself.*

"He will be the Lord Paramount of the Iron Islands one day, Robb. He'll remember everything you say and do when that day comes."

"You want me to try and be friends with him, then?"

"I want you to try and not be enemies with him. I cannot make you treat him as a brother, nor would he want you to after this, but I would ask you to treat him as an equal and give him no more reasons to hate you or the North." He met his son's eyes, just as his own father had used to whenever he asked his sons to do something for him. "Can you do this for me, Robb?"

Robb nodded again without a moment's hesitation. "I will."

"Thank you," Eddard gave his son a small smile. "When Brandon and I were young, our father told us that the choices we made today would always have an impact on tomorrow, so we should never do something if we weren't ready to live with the consequences of it."

"What would uncle Brandon have done, if he was in my place," Robb asked. "Would he have hit him too?"

"He would have drawn his sword," he said simply. *If Brandon was there in Robb's place and Lya in Arya's, Theon would have been dead before he could loose his arrow.*

"And father..." his son asked with a solemn and sad voice, afraid of not living up to what his father expected of his son and heir. "What would you have done?"

Eddard smiled again, making his son feel more at ease.
"I would have hit him, and my father would have told me to push him instead."

Robb laughed as he returned to his friends, more at ease than he had been when Eddard had him come to the front, accepting of the punishment he had been given...and more importantly, the words his father had given him. There's no point in giving a stronger punishment. Theon's nose will heal in time, as will Robb's hand, and anything more severe would just distract from what I told him. He will have plenty of time to think about what he did whilst he works in the kitchens. The shewolf stepped over a small grey pebble and sniffed at the air with excitement, catching the scent of Winterfell for the first time before moving far more eagerly than before. Even for a mortal man with a mortal nose, every realm in the Seven Kingdoms had its own unique smell that could tell more about the land and the people that called it home than any book or maester ever could - the Vale smelled of old stones and old forests, the Riverlands of bubbling streams and freshly cut timbers, the Stormlands of damp earth and coming rainclouds, the Reach of blooming wildflowers and unending fields of golden wheat, the Iron Islands of salt, smoke and the oceans mist...but none of them were more alluring than that of the North and Winterfell and home.

And none more foul than that of Dorne.

Dorne and the North had a long and quarrelsome history that had began with the construction of the canal, which had reduced the journey from Braavos to Lannisport to a quarter of what it once was, meaning the great merchants of the east could more quickly and safely make it to the markets in Westeros...which had crippled Dorne, as trade no longer flowed into their ports as it once had...and the people of the sandy, dry realm hated Northerners for it. They told their children horror stories about Northern lords, tales about how the Starks would give the babies of their defeated enemies to the wierwood trees to earn the favor of the Old Gods, how it had been him who had killed Elia and her babies...and how the entire rebellion was nothing more than a Northern scheme to usurp the Iron Throne, with Robert a Stark puppet who would marry a Stark girl before disappearing across the Narrow Sea, leaving Eddard Stark himself to rule as Lord Regent of the Seven Kingdoms. It was poison neither he nor any of his companions cared to hear, but the worst part of it all was how they refused to give them supplies or even any water for their steeds...and it left him and those who were with him no choice but to take them by force. We did some dishonorable things in Dorne...things I regret...but there was no other choice. We were only a day and a half's ride from the tower, not that we knew it then, but our steeds were weakening from thirst, and so were we.

He sighed to himself, the sound going unnoticed by his sons and the wards placed into his care by the noble families of the North...and let himself smile again as he looked around the open countryside and saw one of the peaceful and prosperous villages that covered not just the lands of his family, but the kind that were across the entirety of the North from the Wall to the Neck, the orange cows of their herd allowed to freely roam the thawing plains beneath the watching eyes of a tall and thin tower, carefully built for a good field of view over both the village and their pasture, and at the top stood a few men, holding cheaply built hunting crossbows and spears, enough to protect their pasture and enough to deter any small band of wildlings who somehow found a way around the Wall. One of them - a little younger than Robb from the look of him, still more a boy than a man grown - waved to him, and so he waved back, as any good and true liegelord would before continuing on his way towards the city of Winterfell. The North had no people who were born into servitude, not even amongst the common farmers who worked the land or the herdsmen who tended to the cattle, no, the people of the North were born free and they died free, just like the Freefolk beyond the Wall. They could choose their own masters and where to live if they so desired, with some even leaving the North to seek their fortunes elsewhere...but the vast majority were content to stay at home, never travelling far from the town or village where they were born and doing the same work that their fathers and grandfathers had done before them, whether that was working in the fields or not.
It had been one of the hardest things for him to learn when he had been outside of the North for the first time, and even though his old maester had taught him as much as he could about the south for the day he would become a ward, it took him weeks of awkward moments to fully realize what it meant. Even in Winterfell, there were a few servants who kept the Faith of the Seven, people who had followed his wife north after the birth of their first child at the end of the rebellion, and he knew that some of them still came in to do their duties on days of fasting - which was in support of Hugor of the Hill, who ate nothing but bread and water for seven days as he led the first of the Andals to the hills upon which he would later be named king - even though it made them weak and weary. So, he always gave them a few coppers after each meal of the day, which meant that when they broke their fast on the dawn of the eighth day, they would have enough money saved up to have a hearty meal with good ale to go with it. It felt like the least he could do for them after their years of tireless service in a land that was as unfamiliar to them as the Vale had been to him, and they loved him for it...but in the Vale, it was different. Servants never expected such a reward for their duties as so few lords ever gave them out, since they expected nothing less than the best everyday and would punish them for anything else, but they gave no praise and no reward for doing better, either, with some lords going so far as to say that living inside the castle's walls and having a few meals a day was payment enough for their duties. But when he had given his wooden training sword to a hopeful young serving boy on the Warrior's Day, Jon and Robert had been stunned into utter silence as he handed the boy the weapon and gave him a few words of advice on how to use it and how to defend himself from harm. Neither of them had expected the second son of such a powerful family to care much about the hopes and dreams of a lowborn serving boy, yet alone one who kept the Faith and not the Old Gods...and yet, he had.

Jon Arryn had never been more proud of him.

Robert had even tried to do the same, "thanking" the pretty young seamstress who mended his cloak in private after dinner one day...and nine months later, she gave birth to his bastard daughter, Mya. Jon Arryn didn't even have to ask him if she was his - her coal black hair and sky blue eyes were proof enough of who her father was - and Robert had doted on her the way only a loving father could, getting her expensive gifts and toys whenever he could and having his brother Stannis send him more and more coin from the coffers of the Stormlands to get her whatever he thought she might have wanted, and when it came time for them to go to Harrenhal for the tourney, he had even planned to bring her along with him, only for Jon Arryn to tell him that it would be unseemly for the entire realm to see his bastard daughter besides him, especially when the king and all his family were present. It was one of the few times Robert had argued with Jon Arryn, even refusing to go without her for a time, till Jon Arryn reasoned that declining an invite to such a grand tournament would be a grave insult, not just to Lord Whent, but to all the other guests who were coming to the tournament and were expecting him to be there...and of course, it meant he wouldn't be able to see his betrothed. He was in a foul mood the entire ride to Harrenhal, but once we got there he started to cheer a little and was his normal self again at the melee....but he was never the same after the rebellion.

Rhaegar had almost killed him on the Trident, gripping the sword of his blade with one hand and the grip with the other before thrusting it through a dent in Robert's breastplate, only to be slain before he could he could thrust it home...but it left Robert with a wound so terrible the maester thought he might die that evening, but Robert was young, strong and too stubborn to die so easily, though he had been humbled by the epic duel, understanding that he might not live forever and that one mistake in the wrong time would be the death of him.

His horse climbed over a small hill, the final obstacle, and on the horizon he saw his city...his home. Winterfell's thick grey walls stood tall and proud, covered in the distinct streaks and swirls of bright scarlet that marked the walls with the runes of the First Men, promising that the battlements would
never fall to any attacker so long as men with a love for the Old Gods still stood upon them, ready to take up arms for their defense of their home. He was unsure if there was any true magic behind them, no man could ever be certain of such things, but their effect on the defenders was real enough - there was not a man in the world who wouldn't become more confident when believing the gods were at their side, protecting him from harm and making sure his aim and strikes were true and deadly. The gates in their bronze plating stood wide open with merchants coming and going alongside villagers bringing their goods to market in the wealthy city, with only the teeth of the portcullis bearing above, gleaming in the light like the fangs of some forgotten monster ready to snap down on the people passing beneath them.

Winterfell was the beating heart of the North, the place where all the major roads joined together and where the last great stretch of the Kingsroad came to an end, with only a smaller and narrower path - built in the days of the first King Jaehaerys, who was fondly remembered even in the North - continuing up from Winterfell to the Gift and then onto the Wall where it became the responsibility of the Night's Watch thanks to it being on their land. They had built new roads that stretched from Westwatch-by-the-Bridge to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, so as to make it easier and quicker for them to redeploy men from one castle to the next even in a snowstorm...and there were rumors among the smallfolk and the men of Winterfell's guard that the Lord Commander was considering a new road in the lands beyond the Wall, the Frostroad some called it...but they were exactly that as far as he knew - rumors. Benjen would have told me if the Lord Commander had any plans for it, and if he did I would gladly give them my support. The Freefolk are no different than we were in the days before Brandon the Builder raised Winterfell. Who knows what they could do, if we let them live in peace? There were those few in the North who wanted to sally forth into the lands beyond the Wall to slaughter the Freefolk and wipe them out utterly, but he would have no such thing done, not when the Watch was in no need of aid or when the Freefolk had done no crimes against the Seven Kingdoms...and the word of Winterfell was law, iron and unquestionable, less a lord find his lands and castle in the hands of the closest cadet branch, as his father had told him before, though he himself saw no need for such harsh measures... since they were happy to carry out his commands, and he knew every lord of his generation well enough to know how they would act long before he sent his messages to them, even if his brother knew some of them better than he had. He was always better with them than I was. That's why he was the heir and I the spare.

He led his retinue forward with a smile as they headed towards the gatehouse...and he could hear the awed speech from those nearby as they looked towards his group and saw her at his side. Direwolf, they said, Eddard Stark has adirewolf. The Starks have direwolves! People stood still and made way for them to enter the city, in awe of the enormous shewolf walking besides him, who trod forward and paid little heed to the crowds that were forming on either side of them to see what had not been seen in so long. Bells rung out across the city to tell of their return as men set down their tools and women stopped with their children besides them to see the wolf...and then the rumbling spread through the crowd as fast as lightning, the stunned murmurs turning to a thundering cheer that was as loud as the greatest of battles, racing through the city like a summer's blaze ripping through a dry forest, and in what felt like seconds it was as if every man, woman and child within the city was gathered on the streets that stretched before him to the castle above, jostling and vying for their chance to see the wolf, eagles perching atop of roofs and bears pushing through the crowds as the wargs of the Snowcloaks watched as their brothers-in-arms joined the cheering crowds and stopped anyone that might have wanted to run out and touch the shewolf.

They love her. We all do.

He smiled as his horse stepped onward, waving for the crowd, for his beloved people, and the roar they gave him in reply was deafening. He reached for his leather coinpurse, swollen near enough to
bursting with enough silver that there was never an unexpected expense he could not handle, and he pulled apart the strings and took a handful of the coins within, throwing them into the crowds with a smile and a wave to any who caught them, Robb following his lead and doing the same as soon as he saw the first coin leave his hand. The cheering crowds grow louder at the sight of their lord's generosity, the Snowcloaks prevented any fighting from breaking out over the coins and keeping his goodwill honest and true.

A small girl, no older than Arya was, slipped from her young mother's grasp with a blue winter's rose in her hands, running alongside him even as the Snowcloaks rushed to stop her from getting too close to their lord...but before they could get anywhere near her, she was besides him, offering him the rose.

"Thank you," he said with a smile, reaching down with a gloved hand and taking the rose from her as the Snowcloaks stood and watched, the daughter's mother watching with pride as he mussed her hair...then he reached into his coin purse again, and gave the brave girl a gold dragon - the only one he had carried with him for the hunt - and another smile. She ran back to her mother and father, their voices drowned out amongst the cheering crowds, and he watched her mother burst into tears at the sight of the coin. *They've never seen one before. I have hundreds of thousands more in the vaults of Winterfell, but they only need one to change their lives forever, so long as they use it well.*

He waved at her again, then continued on his way, leading his horse through the bustling streets and into the market, houses growing bigger and larger as the families who owned them grew wealthier and more able to house their kin from outside the city, and amongst the cheers a single word grew stronger and louder with every voice that joined the chant, direwolf banners flying proudly wherever the eye could see.

"Stark! Stark! Stark!"

He threw coins to the crowds to left and to the right of him, aiming for those who looked as if they needed them most, never losing his smile...and when he saw the wierwood tree that watched over the city's busiest market looking down upon him from its hill with a wide smile and proud eyes, he couldn't but think that they were the eyes of his father, delighted at the return of direwolves to the North once again. *I can only hope that he is as proud of me as the people of Winterfell are...* With the battlements of Winterfell in sight, he looked to the top of the gatehouse, searching for his wife's beautiful auburn hair - whenever he entered the city, she always waited for him to return by standing atop the gatehouse, just as she had waited for her father's return when she was little - but found no trace of her there...a bad sign. She was always there for him when he returned to the castle after a hunt or any other journey that took him away from the castle, so he urged his horse on a little quicker and continued to the castle, throwing the last of his coins to an old man-at-arms, who still wore an old direwolf tabard over his chest, the tidiest and most well kept of all the clothes he wore. The old soldier caught the coin and dropped to one knee, looking towards the ground and not rising again until he had passed down the street, a sign of the highest respect and done only by serving-men in the presence of a king...or someone they respected and loved as much as one.

He sighed as he looked at the castle again and saw nothing of the woman he loved so much, despite the cheers and the energy of the crowd washing over him like the waves of a beach. There must have been something wrong if she was not there to see him come home again, but someone would have ridden out to him if there had been an accident...no, that didn't bare thinking about. He refocused himself on the crowds to take his mind off of it, waving to the crowds once again with a smile he hardly felt like wearing...and the shewolf knew it. She picked up her pace and moved faster, giving him a reason in front of the entire city to urge his horse to go quicker than before...and so he did, matching the Direwolf's fast strides and crossing the last stretch of the street in what felt like the blink
of an eye to his concerned mind. The castle was in as good a mood as the city, with men and women watching and smiling at the sight of the shewolf, who sniffed around in search of something...or someone, but as much as he might have wanted to, he could pay her no attention, and he climbed from his horse as Rodrik walked over, a weary expression on his face.

Eddard swallowed whatever fears he might have had, and asked with lordly voice. "Where is my lady wife?"

"She is inside the nursery with your youngest son," Rodrik answered with a small and tired smile to his lord's unseen relief. "He has been giving her hell all morn, nightmares, or so it seems, and none of the maids can calm him but her...and herself not for long. I even tried to calm him the way I had Jory when he was still a babe, but nothing seems to work."

"Oh?" Eddard removed his riding gloves and passed them to a servant. "What of?"

"I cannot be sure, my lord, just that he's been terrified ever since you left Winterfell."

...Catelyn told me he's been wanting to see me. I've been so busy as of late I haven't had time for my youngest.

"I'll go see her, then," he said, turning his attention to the shewolf who Farlen was trying to entice with warm furs and fresh meat, the shewolf looking over him carefully, then back to Eddard and the Great Hall. "Make sure she is well looked after, and have Luwin look at her wound."

Rodrik nodded. "Of course, my lord...and if I may say, what a sight she is."

He smiled, taking off his quiver and passing it and his bow to another servant. "Aye, she is."

He walked inside the castle and left the busyness of the courtyard - where lovestruck men were helping the targets of their affection dismount and where hopeful young hunters were boasting to one another of their kills, even though Bran had more than everyone else combined. Inside the emptiness of the great hall, he could hear the sound of his son's wails being carried through the pipes in the walls and through the open doors and walls, and nothing could have made him move more quickly but a run. When he arrived, he saw Old Nan and his wife trying everything they could to calm him, rocking him in turns and offering him toys and everything either of them knew to try and stop his tears, but the moment little Rickon saw him it became clear what it was he wanted. He tried to worm his way out of Catelyn's arms, but with weariness across her, she walked over and passed him into Eddard's arms.

Then Rickon stopped crying.

"Don't go! Ever!" muttered his youngest, the tiredness from all his constant crying quickly catching up with him.

"It's alright," he said with his softest and most gentle voice as his tired wife sat down upon a chair to have a moment's rest. "I'm here now."

"Don't...go..."

"I won't."

Rickon smiled...and then he was fast asleep. He turned to Catelyn and asked, his voice a whisper.
"What was he scared of?"

"He had a nightmare," she replied with an exhausted voice. "I couldn't understand what he was saying, but he said there was darkness, drums and...water."

"The womb, from what I can make of it," said Old Nan, taking Rickon from his arms and tucking him into bed when it was clear he wouldn't wake up. "Not that he should remember that."

The womb...?

Gods give me strength...the pups...

"Catelyn, I -"

The shewolf walked into the room, as silent as a shadow, and before he could say another word she walked past him and lay down at her feet, the first time she had done so since he and the others had found her in the Wolfswood.

Catelyn looked down at the direwolf in awe for a few seconds, then she looked at him in confusion. "How...?"

"I can explain everything in my solar, my lady."

Catelyn nodded at him with a tired and weary look, one he replaced with a small smile as he helped her rise from her seat again...and when he did, the shewolf climbed back to her feet and walked alongside Catelyn, the realization striking him in all of it's force.

The mother direwolf was following the mother of the Stark children.

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End of Part 14!

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy, where to start! In this part, the Stark retinue returns to Winterfell after the hunt, the shewolf in tow. In the past, there had been so many direwolves in the North that they were beyond counting, but over time, their number has declined, and eventually they disappeared south of the Wall. Attempts were made to try and bring them back by trying to capture direwolves from the Haunted Forest and beyond, but it was extremely difficult for anyone to try and track down a direwolf in its native habitat and impossible to capture one there...and eventually, some people started to think that they had died out entirely, and that the rumors of them still existing beyond the Wall were simply sightings of large wolves, not true Direwolves. But when they were common in the North, they were common, and almost every cadet branch of the Starks had a direwolf or two with them and the Starks themselves had one or two for every member of the family...and simply said, at that kind of number, they were utterly impossible to fight against if you
were in smaller numbers...and they can be taught to tell the difference between someone who comes from south of the Wall and those from beyond it.

Simply put, they made wildling raids a nightmare for anyone who tried to get close towards the true Stark lands.

Eddard's father, Rickard Stark, was one of those who was eager to try and bring them back to the North, funding a dozen expeditions, and though they found real direwolves in the land beyond the Wall, they were never able to capture one, and so they returned empty handed. To say that Eddard's excited would be an understatement for sure...and the entire population of Winterfell are excited to see a direwolf again, just like how the people of Dragonstone would be excited to see dragons in their skies once again...and speaking of Winterfell, Eddard tries to be a good ruler there, one who stirs his people's hearts so that they carried out any command he gave them willingly, not because of any force he had to use, and he tries to act like a father might to his smallfolk - he rules with a firm, but gentle hand.

Anyway...this shewolf has an interest not in Eddard, but in Catelyn, with the mother of the direwolf pups going to the mother of the Stark children...and simply put, we're going to be seeing more of her in the next part, as it'll be a Catelyn PoV and the last one before Robert and Co arrive.

And Eddard has tried to make it as clear as possible what wearing a white cloak means, especially in what it will take away from him. He knows a little of the regrets that Benjen has, and he doesn't want Bran to suffer from them unless he is absolutely sure he doesn't want those things. Nothing could make him happier than to see Bran join the Kingsguard, and nothing could make him sadder than to see Bran join the Kingsguard and realize he wants those things, so he is definitely trying to make sure he knows what he will miss if he does manage to earn himself a white cloak, despite the possibility that the Faith might try and persuade the royal family otherwise.

Alongside the construction of the canal, one of the biggest things to have been built in the North is it's roads, which are essential for reliable pathways during wintertime, since rivers can freeze - and destroy wooden bridges as the water absorbed by the wood freezes and expands year after year - and normal roads can be covered in snow and become almost impossible to follow...but by building roads that stand a few inches taller than the ground on either side of them, it becomes possible to see where the road is even under snowfall, making it easier for someone to find one's way home, and the very existence of the roads is useful as a navigational aid, since you can reliably go to a road and follow it along and inevitably get to one of the major holdings of the North. In combination with this, there are now strong stone bridges at the important crossings of the North, though none of them have any Frey style setups...yet Of course, the Starks aren't the only ones to realize the benefits of having more roads, and all of the Seven Kingdoms have more roads than in canon...and none more so than the Westerlands, who have so many of such high quality that even mountainside villages are close to good, paved roads along shallower slopes, making it easier to get goods to and from market by cart. Overall, House Lannister is in a far stronger position than they were in canon, thanks to their massively increased income - they can afford to reduce the output of their gold mines without sapping their own strength, so when they led the Westerlands away from prisoner/slave labor, it reduced the amount of spare wealth their vassals had...whilst keeping themselves in an unassailable position.

Cutting the rest of the summary because of character limitations, see the comments for
the remaining half! :D
Catelyn II

Chapter Notes

Just remember, this is the final update for this update cycle - there won't be another until the Dragon of Harrenhal has reached part ten (because it's very, very far behind on it's own update schedule) and until various other projects have had some tender loving care. Don't worry, there shouldn't be that much of a delay now that the Citadel says the summer is over...and that means my writing can start speeding back up! :D

However, because AO3 has yet to see my pretty, pretty family trees and the information that comes with them, there'll be a special part 16 of sorts for the various trees and the little comedy one shot that appear in the AH.com thread.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Catelyn sighed to herself as she walked through the halls, her beloved husband on one side of her and the direwolf on the other...and Rickon far behind her, sound asleep in the nursery. On days like this, when she could not quieten her youngest babe, she felt terrible, for nothing she had tried had managed to calm him and make him happy again till her husband arrived, held him once and whispered a few soothing words to him...and then Rickon was asleep again. Nothing her septon at Riverrun could have ever told her could have prepared her for that, or for his dreams about what could have only been the womb, or for...her, the direwolf that was walking besides her.

Why is she following me and not Ned? I am a Tully of Riverrun, not a Stark of Winterfell, and my family keeps the New Gods, not the Old, but she is at my side all the same.

She looked towards the shewolf, letting herself properly take in her shape and her great size for the first time - her head was much larger compared to the rest of her body than on a normal wolf, that was for certain - and glancing at the great swell of her middle, where her pups were waiting to be born. It wouldn't be long before she gave birth to them now, not with how big she was and how her little Rickon had seemingly managed to warg into one of the pups inside her in the middle of the night...but if her youngest child had managed to forge a bond with an unborn direwolf, what about the rest of her children? Were they all wargs? What if the shewolf was carrying as many pups as Catelyn herself had children...or more? Would that mean she was going to have more children?

There were hundreds of questions, with more and more of them coming to mind with every second that passed in silence, but only one of them had an answer for her : the motherwolf had sought her - the mother of the Stark family - out, even though they had never seen one another before, even though she wasn't a Stark or even of the First Men, even though she had been praying to the Seven since she was old enough to understand what the Faith was...and the shewolf was following her already, sitting down whenever she sat and walking whenever she walked, the fact she had walked into the nursery to sit down at Catelyn's feet only to stand back up and follow her out of the room was proof enough of that. If only she had followed Ned instead... She quietly sighed to herself, hoping that her husband did not hear and hoping that she could take her mind off it - she needed to think with a calm and clear mind, one able to focus on the shewolf, not one that was tired out and weary from trying to get her littlest to rest, or one that was still surprised by the mere existence of the
No, she had to be focused and steady and above all, calm, just as her uncle Brynden had taught her to be when she was but a shy little girl at Riverrun all those years ago, long before the birth of either Lysa or Edmure, before the death of her own mother in childbed made her become a lady at the age of six...just as how Sansa was as mature as a woman twice her age because of all the responsibilities and expectations placed upon her by all the other young ladies of the North who looked to her for guidance. Sansa must be so excited by all of this...all of my children must be...but why me? There was nothing more she wanted than a simple and quiet life with the man she loved the most, but the shewolf...she had a meaning to the people of the North, whether they kept the Old Gods or not, but what would it mean to them if they saw her following someone who had become a Stark by marriage and not by birth?

It was enough to make her want to leave her husband in the halls and go to the sept to light a candle and utter a prayer to the Crone for guidance before even discussing it, but she was a Tully of Riverrun and her words were simple : Family, Duty, Honor. Her husband and all of her children were Starks, the direwolf was their symbol and merely looking at her husband’s smiles and glances towards the shewolf said that she and her pups were already a part of their family...so, did that not mean that she had a duty to accept her, too?

_I only hope Ned can explain everything..._

Her husband, so obviously sensing the conflict raging inside of her, gave her a reassuring smile as he opened the door to his private Den, a room with a key that was passed down from one generation of Starks to the next, just like their family blade was and tended to by only the most trusted of servants. He stepped inside first and the shewolf followed, lying upon the warm and soft snow bear pelt before she could even take her first step. She stepped inside silently without uttering a word, taking a seat opposite of her husband in a chair of masterfully crafted oak, the wood as silent as the entire room.

"Catelyn..." her husband said with a quiet and apologetic tone. "I'm sorry for surprising you with her...none of us expected to find her in the woods. I would have had Jory tell you, but I thought it best to tell you myself."

_I knew Jory had came back from the hunt early, but I hadn't had a chance to speak with him anyway._

"You needn't be sorry about bringing back a direwolf, Ned...but...why is she following me? I'm not a Stark -"

Her husband cut her off with another soft smile. "You are, if not by birth then by marriage. You've birthed five Starks, and if the gods are kind we'll have a few more yet. You are a Stark now, and there's not a man in the North who would say otherwise."

A warm feeling rose inside of her at his words; there had been countless lords in the North who thought she would give her husband weak sons or only daughters, and dozens of women who were all too eager to take her place if she ever died in childbed or from a winter's chill and in the early days of their marriage she was sure they said as much to one another...but now, after giving her beloved husband three strong sons and two beautiful daughters, they said nothing.

"But...still...why would a direwolf follow me, Ned? I could understand if she followed you, or your sister if she still lived, but why would she pick me over anyone else? Over people from the North who keep the Old Gods?"
Eddard's cheerful mood died down at the mention of his sister, his smile fading away to a more solemn look. "You are both mothers."

She looked towards the shewolf, who had silently set herself down in front of the fire and curled up to rest after her long journey to the castle, though she seemed a little restless, wiggling often on the pelt as she struggled to get comfortable. It wouldn't be long before she gave birth, now, everyone who had ever lived inside a castle knew that there was no greater sign of a bitch readying to whelp than her refusing to stay still. ...and when she does, her pups will follow my children and they'll keep each other safe, or so I might hope. When she did...would her pups follow her children around and keep them safe, just as the direwolves of the past did?

*I would hope so...no one could ever hurt any of my children then, if there was a direwolf at their side to keep them safe from harm.* She smiled slightly towards the shewolf; she was five feet high at the shoulder, perhaps another foot above it, as large as a pony and twice as muscular, certainly strong enough to rip a grown man from horseback if need be. She might not have liked the idea of such a powerful beast following her children around, especially her little Rickon...but only a fool could even try and deny the benefits of having direwolves besides her children.

They would do more than keep them safe, they were a living, breathing symbol of the North's power and of the Stark dominion over that power...but that was not something that should have been hers, and yet...it was. For whatever reason she had, the direwolf had chosen her over Ned, and it boggled her mind as to why it could have been so. *It can't be as simple as he says...can it? I brought five Starks into the world and I am a mother to them, but surely that can't be enough to have her loyalty?*

She turned back towards her husband and asked with a quiet and solemn voice. "Is there another direwolf in the woods? *Your* direwolf?"

"There must be one in the North somewhere, I cannot see how a pregnant shewolf could make it through the Wall on her own, but..." Her husband sighed. "There's no sign of him in the Wolfswood, and it is nigh impossible to find a direwolf unless he wants to be found."

"Then...I hope he shows up sooner rather than later," she said with a soft smile. "I'll need your help with her, Ned. I never imagined having a direwolf of my own, not once."

Her husband reached out across the table and took her hand in his, smiling. "I will help you whenever and wherever I can, love, I swore as much before the gods Old and New on the day you became my wife. All of Winterfell will help you with her, should you need it."

She smiled and climbed from her chair to leave. It would be hard for her to get used to her presence and even harder for her to come to terms with what she meant, but with her loving husband at her side to help her whenever she might need his aid, she knew -

"There is more," her husband said with a bitter tone as she turned to face him again. "Theon almost hit Arya with an arrow during the hunt."

The shewolf perked up and rose to her feet to pace around the room as Catelyn stared at her husband in silence.

"He....he what?"

"It was an accident," her husband said, trying to calm her. "The shewolf had snuck up on us, even
Bran didn't see her till she was besides Arya. Theon shot at her, in case she tried to attack, but Robb hit him and broke his knuckles, too."

She took a deep breath. Her husband had come back from the Greyjoy Rebellion with Theon in tow, heir to the Iron Islands now that all of the young kraken's brothers were slain in Balon's foolish attempt to break from the Iron Throne. He had been a quiet and anxious boy then and had been nervous around the eldest of Robb's friends, but for a time he and Robb got along well, and Catelyn had hoped that Theon might have been able to pry Robb away from his bastard brother...but the reverse had happened instead. Theon had picked on Jon for being a bastard, so Robb and his friends cast him out and hadn't been fond of him since, whilst Theon himself had given up on trying to make friends with them - or so it seemed - choosing to instead spend his days in the city drinking and whoring.

Theon had picked on Robb's bastard brother, so her son and all his friends had cast him out and hadn't been fond of him since, whilst Theon himself had given up on trying to make friends with them - or so it seemed, - instead choosing to spend his free time in the city drinking and whoring, something she hadn't truly minded, since it kept him out of trouble and away from Robb. Her husband did his best to try and guide him away from such things, but none of his lessons seemed to take...and that was one of the most important reasons for Theon to be warded at Winterfell; he was not just a hostage meant to keep the peace, but a guest to be welcomed and befriended so that he would never want to wage war against the realm again. But now he had shot an arrow towards her youngest daughter, even if it was by accident and done with the best of intentions, she wanted him at Winterfell no longer, not when there was a chance he might "accidentally" loose an arrow at Robb or anyone else, something that seemed like it was only ever getting more likely.

"Perhaps it would be best to have him warded at another castle, then," she suggested with a voice as cold as winter. There was not a single cadet branch of the Starks who would refuse having him in exchange for having their children at Winterfell, indeed, they would probably be glad to do so.
"Send him to Darkport or to Greystone or to anywhere other than Winterfell...I don't want him near our children anymore, Ned."

"I was thinking about it, actually," her husband rubbed his tired eyes. "Jon Arryn would know how to handle him, there's not much different between Theon and how Robert was when he was his age, or so it seems."

A small smile formed as she thought of an idea. If Robert and Theon were so similar, then perhaps they would get along well enough that the king would be happy to take him on as a royal ward - the Greyjoy boy would be taken to the capital, far away from Winterfell and the North, watched over by the Kingsguard and taught how to sail the Narrow Sea by the Master of Ships himself. It would be better for everyone, not just Theon but for Robb and the rest of her children, too, even her husband's bastard would no longer have to put up his constant mockery.

"If he and the king would get along well, then maybe he should be a royal ward. Let Robert have him in King's Landing."

Eddard nodded in agreement with her. "I will have a raven sent to King's Landing, and if the king is willing to have him then I will have Theon sent by ship from White Harbour as soon as I can."

She smiled at her husband, "Thank you. I know you wouldn't want to send him away after the king entrusted you with looking after him, but I think it is the best thing for him, now."

"Aye, it is. He needs to learn how to sail, else the rest of the Ironborn would never accept him as
their lord, and he cannot learn how to do it so far inland. Stannis could teach him such things better than I ever could."

"Is there anything else?"

"Only that Arya is becoming a fine hunter in her own right. She was almost as good as Bran, but he was too fast for her to keep up," her husband said with nothing but fondness. "Dacey is teaching her everything she knows."

She nearly sighed in front of her husband; she loved her youngest daughter with all of her heart, just as any mother should, but she could never approve of the things Arya liked to do. It was unwomanly for a young lady such as her to use the bow or go hunting, even women riding for fun was frowned upon in some parts of the South, but her daughter had no interest in anything that a proper lady should have - her stitches were clumsy and lacked any finesse, she danced as if she was blind and clubfooted, and then there was her skill at the harp...her playing of which always resulted in sounds that would be at home in the deepest, darkest depths of the seven hells. But she's not bad at them because she doesn't have any talent for it, but because she's not interested in anything that a lady should be interested in. She can fight almost as well as Bran can, only being worse because she started training later than he did.

"Ned...must you keep letting her do such things? They're unladylike," she reasoned. "Even the other ladies of the North do not hunt or fight like she and Dacey do."

"Are they?" her husband responded with a small smile. "Daena and Visenya Targaryen both went on hunts and liked to fight, and they were both queens in their day."

The North was always fond of the Targaryens till the rebellion...it's no wonder he knows of them both well enough.

"I would never stop any of our sons or daughters from doing whatever they want to do, so if she wants to hunt or fight, so be it," he finished as he rose from his seat and started towards the door.

Catelyn nodded without saying a single word in disagreement, she knew better than anyone that her husband rarely ever changed his mind when it came to matters involving their children or his bastard son. She had tried for weeks and months on end to try and convince him not to have him legitimized, to stop him from turning the bastard boy into a very real threat to Robb and all their other trueborn children, but Eddard had simply made the arrangements for children from the Stark's bastard branches to come to Winterfell now that they were of age, taking them on as wards and showing her how quickly they had become friends with Robb and his half-brother...and now, they were utterly inseparable from one another, with Eddard and Torrhen Karstark never being more than a dozen feet away from Robb except when they were in bed at night.

The reverse was just as true, not just for her children but also for the generations of Starks that went back to centuries beyond counting - if the Starks of Winterfell were the father of all their cadet branches, then the branches themselves were their pups, and though they might quarrel against one another and fight from time to time they were still kin, and a threat against one was a threat against the entire pack...and just as a direwolf would never allow his pups to be harmed, just as the Starks of Winterfell would never allow their cadet branches to be truly threatened. No, they would raise their banners in defense of their kin, no matter how distant they might have become, settling feuds between them fairly and peacefully in the halls of Winterfell so that they might avoid shedding the blood they shared. They've always protected their branches and come to their aid whenever it was needed and I love my husband...but he wouldn't change that, not even for me or anyone else in the
Her husband opened the door for her and the shewolf with a warm and loving smile, but the moment he did they heard the echoing of cheers from just outside the keep, carried along the halls by cold air and accompanied by laughter and the clapping of hands. It was fight night, she knew, a time when the future lords of the North drank plenty of ice wine, stripped down to their breeches and fought one another in the snow, beating each other senseless in fast, brutal fights with only their fists and feet as weapons. It was an ancient tradition, and it was utter madness...a madness that had started to spread outside the North, as it was a good way for brothers and friends to ease the tension during winter. Her brother Edmure was supposedly a good brawler in his own right, having gotten into a fight with a young Frey named Olyvar after a sudden springtime thaw had washed out the roads and flooded the banks in the night, leaving his entire party stuck until the water went down again. Olyvar and a few other Freys had been on their way to a tournament at Seagard, and though the day had started amicably enough the pressure had started to build as the men drank and japed to each other to pass the time...and eventually, her brother Edmure had asked if Olyvar's sister, Roslin, was as ugly as the rest of the Frey brood. Edmure...were you honestly expecting him to agree with you and not to start a fight?

After her brother had made his way back to Riverrun, boasting of winning - even though his nose was broken alongside all of his knuckles, not to mention almost losing an eye - her father had "punished" him by sending him away to the Arbor for a moon's turn, so that he could think about what he had done far away from the Riverlands, naturally making sure to give him plenty of gold so that he wouldn't have to ask for anything, whilst Olyvar had returned to the Twins bloody and beaten...and Walder Frey had sent him to the Wall for striking the son and heir of his liegelord...and losing, if she knew him as well as she thought she might.

"Tell me, my lord-husband," she said as a servant walked past with fresh candles for the night. "Did you ever take part in those fights?"

"Once or twice," her husband replied with a lordly face as he closed the door behind her, but in those grey eyes of his she could still see the love he had for her, no matter how hard he tried to keep up the stoic appearance that befitted the Lord of Winterfell in public. "It was after having a little too much wine and being too drunk to stop Brandon from dragging me into the fights...he once fought against the Greatjon Umber for nearly an hour straight before Maester Walys and Rodrik had to put an end to it."

"Who did you fight?" she asked out of curiosity as they entered the stairwell at the end of the hall.

"Rickard Karstark," he answered as they headed down the steps, "It was a fair enough fight for Rodrik; Rickard was taller and heavier than me, but he was even more drunk than I was. We had all had half a bottle of wine each, since it was the last day before I would leave for the Eyrie."

Her husband laughed quietly, the sound echoing through the empty stairwell. "I had to meet Jon Arryn with the bruises still healing, but they made me fast friends with Robert, he must have asked half a hundred questions about where they came from. He had never heard of the unarmed melee before, but he was asking Jon Arryn if he could go to Winterfell to see it for himself before long."

She smiled, following her husband into the great hall. "I am sure the king would be delighted to visit Winterfell sometime, my lord-husband. Mayhaps we should send him an invitation?"

*And when he comes here we could give him Theon Greyjoy at the same time.*
"It has been a long summer," her husband said, "It can't be long now before winter comes, and after a long summer there is always a longer winter. After the thaw, perhaps, when the winter's end festival begins."

There was not a part of the Seven Kingdoms that did not look beautiful either in spring, summer, autumn or winter, and the North is at its most beautiful in those days when winter is finally giving way to spring, a time when the snow on the ground is still a thick blanket of white refreshed every night, but when the warmth of the sun is finally starting to make itself known again as the days grow long and people can start to leave their homes for more than a few brief hours at a time. Once, she had opened the shutters of her chambers to watch the sunrise and she had saw the snow covered fields of the land around the city gleam a brilliant gold for just a few short moments as the sun rose across the horizon, but in the little time it was there it was more beautiful than the greatest sculpture or the most precious gemstone.

Then there was the celebration of the end of winter - something that all of the kingdoms did in their own unique way - which had the added flair of celebrating the victory of the First Men over the Others at the end of the Long Night, glorifying the legendary deeds of Eldric Shadowchaser and building wights and ice spiders out of snow to smash apart on the final day of the celebration...though the strangest part of it all was the "swords" of frozen fruit that were so popular at that time and unavailable at any other, a mockery of the frozen blades the Others had wielded against the living in the battles of the Long Night made by pouring crushed fruits into wooden casts that were buried in the frozen earth turn the juices to ice. Of course, the tales the entire festival was based off of had been passed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth, growing more twisted from their original incarnations with every retelling, but they were entertaining nevertheless, and even the Northmen thought of them as an enemy long vanquished, something to scare the children with whenever they had been naughty. *My good-brother Benjen told us that even the Freefolk do not speak of them much anymore when we feasted him last year.*

Her husband led her out into the courtyard with the shewolf walking besides her, the direwolf's footsteps completely silent against the thunderous cheers of all the wards of Winterfell and all of her children bar little Rickon, watching as her husband's bastard fought against Tygett Darkstark in the place where they might sometimes cross their training swords, surrounded by tables covered in cups of good wine, Rodrik Cassel watching intently for the moment one fighter was clearly beaten or if he had to intervene and put an end to the fight for their own good. Most of the men had handwraps with padded leather gloves and were barechested or wearing shirts that could be quickly taken off if they were called up to fight, some of them already bloody and battered from fights that had already taken place, whilst the ladies of the court were there, cheering on their brothers and beloved from the sides...and she saw Arya too, sat upon one of the tables with Brandon besides her and Dacey looking after her and telling them both about the strategy and tactics of the melee. *I would rather have them both inside instead of watching this, but so long as Dacey is there to keep them both out of trouble, I will leave them be.*

Jon Snow sent Tygett reeling with a punishing left straight against the Darkstark's cheek, the brown and golden haired youth barely able to withstand the aggressive assault as Jon followed up with a right, keeping the pressure on and the momentum he had started to build.

Robb grinned from the sides, fully dressed and his broken knuckles already bandaged. "Give him hell, Jon!"

"Tyg!" yelled Adara with fear as her brother staggered and swayed. "You can still win this!"

*Seven have mercy, I will never get used to seeing...this.*
Tygett looked to his sisters for the briefest of moments as Jon took a breath to move in for what could only be the final blow of the duel - it was obvious he hadn't the energy for a sustained fight, he had to end it with his next attack, else Jon was bound to outlast him and finish it himself. He turned back to Jon as the bastard threw another punch with all the force he could muster behind it, building up to a near run as he hurled it against him...

...only for Tygett to catch his wrist, just barely, and with a swing of his legs so fast she almost missed it he swept Jon's legs out from beneath him and smashed his free fist straight against Jon's face so hard both of them shouted out in pain as blood streamed from Jon's eyebrow, split open from the sheer force of the impact and as Tygett dropped Jon to the floor, clutching his over hand as Jon landed upon the ground with a pained thud.

Rodrik immediately stepped forward as Robb rushed over to Jon just as Adara did to her brother, ripping his gloves off and quickly unwrapping his swordhand to show the surging purple spreading across the place where his last and third knuckles had once been, the bones behind them broken and the fingers skewed to an unnatural angle. Tygett stared at his hand whilst Robb pulled Jon to his feet, who spat out the band of leather meant to protect his teeth and letting Rodrik take a good look at him.

"Aye," Rodrik said as he gripped Jon's chin and tilted his head to take a better look, eyes narrowing. "You'll need stitches. Robb, take him to Maester Luwin, and you too," he turned to Tygett and Adara, "You've broken your hand."

Jon nodded as he took his hand wrappings and placed them against the cut to staunch the bleeding, holding them tight and closing his right eye to keep the blood out of it.

"I would call this one a tie, Jon," Tygett said with a pained smile as he and Adara walked over to his side, Lyanne sighing and shaking her head before following the others to Maester Luwin's tower.

* A tie, after all that?

"Well fought, Jon," her husband said as Robb and his bastard brother passed by, Jon smiling at his father before continuing on his way. "And you too, Tygett."

Rodrik went to the table that Arya and her brother were sat upon, picking up an old greathelm that was just besides them and filled with rolls of parchment, each having the name of a man willing to fight and ready to be called up at a moment's notice, a bucket filled with the names of all those who had already fought left safe in the dead centre of the table. Once their fight was over and done with he would take their names and place it into the bucket, continuing either till he ran out of names or it was too late to continue the fights, after which he would take both the bucket and the helm and keep them safe for the next time they fought, never letting anyone who had already fought do so again till the helm was completely emptied, so as to make sure they had a chance to recover from the last bout before going into another. It was a crude method, but it meant that the next generation of Northern lords were less likely to have any lasting wounds from their time at Winterfell, but if someone's turn came up and they were obviously unfit to fight Rodrik would put their name back into the helm till there came a time when they were able to not just fight, but to fight *well*.

He took two pieces of the parchment and set the helm down again before working his way through the crowds and back to the open field, the men eagerly awaiting the announcement of who would fight then...and then Dacey, who was smiling perhaps a little too much for a woman who was only there to watch, whispering something into Arya's ear and made her laugh before handing her a long piece of scrap cloth and letting her wrap it around her hands with the utmost care.
"Torrhen Karstark," Rodrik announced loudly, so that there was no one in the crowds who could not hear. "Step forth."

The eldest of the Karstarks at Winterfell proudly stepped forward with his strong arms raised in the air, grinning and garnering a cheer from the crowds before tearing his shirt off and turning the cheering to laughter at the sight of a dozen chunky runes of the First Men drawn in charcoal on his bare skin, covering him from waist to neck, looking like a fierce warrior about to march into the bloody battles of the Andal Invasion.

"Dacey Mormont," Rodrik continued as he read the second sheet of parchment, looking towards the Mormont woman with the utmost respect and not the scorn or contempt that she would have in the South for being a fighting woman. "Step forth."

"Gladly," she smiled as she walked over, hands wrapped but ungloved, curling into fists with practiced movements that caught Torrhen's eye...and put the slightest hint of concern in them.

"It's not fair for me to fight with my jerkin on," she said as she unstrung it and threw it to Arya along with the shirt beneath, who caught them both with a wide grin as her best friend readied herself to fight, her bosom kept out of sight and supported by a linen girdle, a sight that made her want to have a man-at-arms take Bran away or at the very least cover his eyes till she had her clothes back on. *It's not proper.*

"It's not proper to strike a lady," Torrhen objected without a doubt in his voice, "I couldn't fight her even if I wanted to."

"Come now, Torrhen," Dacey said with another smile as she put on her gloves. "I'm not made of glass. I can handle anything you have."

"She's willing to fight," Rodrik said as he turned to Torrhen. "You'd be doing her a greater dishonor by choosing not to fight than by fighting her, and an even greater one if you hold back."

Torrhen looked towards her husband, in desperate need of guidance and hoping for an answer.

All her solemn husband did was nod.

Torrhen swallowed. "Alright, I'll fight, but I don't like it one bit. I won't hold back, Dacey."

Dacey smiled at Torrhen...but it was not like the other warm smiles, no, it was the grin of a wolf staring down at wounded prey that stood no chance.

*...and Torrhen knows it.*

Dacey seemed to dance on the spot as Rodrik stepped back into the crowd, her feet moving as deftly as the fluttering of a butterfly. "I won't hold back on you, either."

Torrhen looked to his brother with an expression so grim it made him laugh.

"Ned, promise me you'll look after her when I'm gone," he japed with a tip of his head towards Alys, even Dacey herself laughing. "Promise me, Ned."

Her husband turned as pale as winter's snow, walking off to the godswood in utter silence as the
fight began, Dacey darting across the courtyard as fast as a warhorse towards a horrified Torrhen before unleashing a ruinous rain of blows before he could even raise his arms to try and defend himself, hitting him with over and over with fast and hard stabbing, cutting and slashing punches that immediately threw him off balance, but Catelyn paid no attention to the utterly one sided fight, not when her husband so clearly needed her.

She quickly followed, but she barely managed six steps before she noticed the shewolf was gone. *I never heard her footsteps over the sound of all the fighting...where could she have went?*

She sighed quietly. *It doesn't matter, I will find her later, but now, Ned needs me.*

The cheering and the laughter started to die down as she got further away from the training field, the sound becoming a dull echo behind her as Eddard stepped into the godswood, herself not far behind. It was the oldest part of Winterfell, the one place that had not changed over the centuries even as the rest of the castle and the city had grown. The wierwood tree was the same as it had been, its crimson leaves shaped like hands and its thick bark as white as bone, with a face as solemn as those of the Starks who prayed before it, and though the rest of the trees in the garden might wither and die, fresh seedlings taking their place to grow anew, the wierwood tree was truly eternal. "Ned, what's wrong?"

His reply was near a whisper. "It is nothing you need to trouble yourself with, love."

"Ned...you can tell me anything," she said, closing the distance between the two and putting her hand on her husband's cheek as she looked into the grey eyes of the man she loved so much.

Her husband sighed, looking away from her and towards the wierwood tree. "It doesn't matter."

"Ned..."

"It was to do with the war," he said, his eyes locking with hers and filled with sadness. "I would...rather not to speak of it, if you would let me."

She nodded with understanding, putting her arms around her husband and embracing him. Nothing could ever hurt her as much as seeing him like this, but if he felt better not speaking about it, then she was happy to leave the matter be and help him get over whatever it was at his own pace. *He will tell me if he wants to tell me, and not before.*

Then she heard a sound, so quiet as to be no louder than the noise of a soft breath, a quiet mewling coming from the far side of the wierwood tree next to one of the three hot pools. She let go of her husband and peered around the tree and saw the shewolf coiled up on the moist soil, her body wrapped around her newborn pups, all of them squirming around in the middle as she kept them warm and safe with her massive body.

"Ned...she's given birth," she said quietly and with a small smile as the shewolf moved ever so slightly to give her pups a little more room and to let them feed for the first time.

Her husband moved to her side, taking a look for himself before smiling. "She has."

They were tiny when compared to their huge mother, only a little bigger than the pups of any other hound or wolf, but they had entered the world with thick coats of fur already grown to help them withstand the bitter cold, but to her it made them look like small balls of fur, their little legs and paws almost unnoticeable amongst their thick furs...but they were beautiful.
"There's five of them," her husband counted, moving the mother wolf's fur ever so slightly to see the pups more clearly, showing one of the pups - whose fur was as grey as stormclouds and smoke - was already feeding as his mother licked at his head to clean away the last of the membranes stuck around his ears.

"One for each of our children," she said as she turned over one of the little pups, a she, who had managed to roll herself over somehow, the light grey pup being gently picked up by the scuff of her neck by her mother and placed against a teat to suckle. "One for all the Starks."

"All of them but Jon," her husband said sadly. "Two she-pups and three males."

There were a few happy laughs as Arya and Bran entered the godswood, the fight over. "Dacey won, and she's going to teach me -"

Arya and her brother stopped dead in their tracks as they saw the pups for the first time, her husband waving them over quietly. "We'll need to move her to the kennels, she can't stay here in the godswood."

She must have come here because it is one of the quietest places in Winterfell, and one of the warmest.

"Bran, find Robb and bring him here," she said as quietly as she could. "And Sansa too, if you can find her." My husband can look after Rickon's pup for the time being, but only the gods know how he'll react when he finds out.

As her second son raced out of the courtyard to find his elder brother and sister, she looked to the shewolf's pups and smiled; there was no desire in her heart to try and keep the pups away from her children, or to send them away with their mother once they were able to walk and survive on their own. No, it was obvious that her children were meant to have the pups, that much was clear. The gods Old or New had sent them, for what were the chances that a pregnant shewolf - the first seen south of the Wall in two hundred years - would be found near Winterfell in the wolfswood and to give birth the same day to the same number of pups that she had trueborn children? It's a sign, but of what I cannot say. Perhaps the gods have sent them to show my children that they have their favor, or...maybe they're here to help them when they need it most...

Her husband picked up the little black pup that was slowly wiggling towards the pond, his soft fur as dark as a moonless sky at midnight, placing him against his mother's belly so that he would have his chance to feed alongside all his siblings, Arya stepping over and putting her hand on the mother wolf's body, smiling, the shewolf licking at her hands and making her laugh even as one of the little pups started cooing at her, letting go of her mother now that she had fed and trying to move towards Arya...only for her mother to pick her up and put her back with all the others as soon as she got too far.

"She likes you," she said to her youngest daughter with a smile.

"Are we going to keep them?" her daughter asked, her greyeyes showing just how much she wanted to have a direwolf of her own. "Please?"

Catelyn looked to her husband...who smiled and nodded. "Aye, we will be, if the shewolf's willing to let us have them after they've been weaned."
Brandon walked into the godswood with excitement, Robb and Sansa following him in along with the bastard, whose cut had already been cleaned and sewn shut to heal....and as soon as the three saw the pups squirming around on the ground and suckling they rushed over, smiling as wide as they could at the adorable sight before them.

"Gods be good," her eldest child said as he looked at the wolves, "They're like balls of fluff."

"I've never seen something so wonderful," Sansa said as she cooed over the smallest of the pups.

The bastard looked over, smiling just like her children were, then he realized how many there were and of which gender...and she watched as his heart broke in complete silence, his excitement turning to the grim melancholy of a man who had seen all his hopes and dreams come so close to fruition only to be dashed to pieces in front of him, the same way Petyr had once looked to her after Brandon had hamstrung him and forced him onto his knees, ready to finish him off with a single thrust through his heart, as he would have if Catelyn hadn't asked him to spare the life of the friend who had grown at her side.

Even she couldn't help but feel fitter for her husband's bastard - Eddard was willing to have him legitimized and to give him the name Stark, he was even willing to give him a lordship of his own somewhere in the North and arrange a good marriage for him...but he would have no direwolf of his own, and without a wolf he would never be a true Stark, despite everything her husband might do for him. She had never been close with him, but it was a bitter thought even for her to see that no matter how much he tried or how close he might get to her children, he could never truly belong with the rest of the family he loved so much...just like Petyr.

"Come," her husband said as he rose, picking up the little black direwolf as soon as he had finished suckling, "We best take them to the kennels so they can rest more comfortably."

Sansa took the tiniest of the litter into her arms, a little shewolf she held in her arms the same way that Catelyn had first held her, humming softly to stop her from whining, just as Catelyn had hummed to her, and rocking her arms ever so gently to calm her and make her comfortable, just as Catelyn had.

She had never been more proud of her daughter than in that moment.

She won't be a girl for long...she's growing up, and she'll be a woman before long.

Arya quickly followed, picking up the other she-pup, looking to her elder sister and trying to copy what she did only for her pup to latch onto her fingers with toothless gums when she tried to stroke her calm.

Sansa took the tiniest of the litter into her arms, calming the whining and scared little shewolf with a caress from the back of her hand and a warm smile, Arya quickly following and picking up the other she-pup, trying to copy what her sister did only for the pup to bite and latch onto her fingers with toothless gums that tickled instead of doing any harm. The pups...the ones they're picking up are acting just like they do.

"Here," Robb smiled as he passed a direwolf pup to Bran and picked up his own, the one whose fur was as grey as a stormy night, holding him with a firm but gentle grasp, to make sure nothing went wrong.

Bran grinned widely as Goldwing perched upon the battlements, holding the little pup close to his
heart. "Winter," he said with a smile as he named his pup, the first of any of her children them to do so. And I must name my own direwolf, sometime, perhaps for my own mother...she would have loved nothing more than to see her grandchildren as I see them now.

"Father..." Jon spoke with a quiet and hopeful tone. "Can..." he swallowed any discomfort he might have had. "...Can I hold that one? I know he is Rickon's...but I will never have a wolf of my own. I only hope to know what it might feel like."

Her husband gave his bastard a sad smile and an understanding nod. "Of course."

Ned slowly walked towards Jon...but then the bastard looked away from him, his gaze going towards something that the shewolf had heard but no one else had. He walked over as the shewolf did...and she dipped her head into the snows and rose again with a little direwolf held between her teeth, the little pup having been the first to be born and the first to wander off whilst her mother was still birthing all the others.

Then she dropped him on the ground and continued on her way, ignoring him completely and following Catelyn, not even stopping to let him feed or nuzzle against her, the sight sending chills down her spine to see. She doesn't care for that pup...Mother have mercy, is that the way that I act to Jon?

Jon crouched down besides the rejected puppy and hoisted him up into his arms, holding him close to his body to warm him and gently rocking him to encourage him to move and wiggle on his own. He was even smaller than Sansa's pup, as white as the snow he had been buried in, wiggling weakly in Jon's arms and completely silent.

And his eyes were open, as bright a red as the shiniest of rubies.

"It would seem we're both bastards," Jon said to his pup before turning to his father. "I'll feed him by bottle and look after him myself, if his mother won't."

She looked towards the shewolf as she sat on the floor, waiting. We are the same as each other, we're both mothers...and we both abandoned a child who needed us.

The thought made bile rise in her throat and caused her stomach to turn. She had never once been a mother to Jon - she had never carried him inside her womb or birthed him into the world, he had none of her blood in his veins, on the contrary, she had treated him as a threat to her children and any grandchildren she might have had. But that was no fault of his own, on the contrary he had treated her with the utmost respect, more than any other bastard might give to the wives of their fathers, but she had given him no hugs when he was afraid, or reassuring words whenever he had a nightmare, or any approval whenever he did something well, no, only her husband had ever done that and whenever Ned had asked her to do the same she had refused. She simply hadn't cared for him, not for a single moment. She had tried to get him sent far away from Winterfell when he was a babe, and when her husband made his desire to have him legitimized and landed known she tried to talk him out of it, first trying to talk him out of legitimizing the boy in the first place and then trying to get him to at least land him far away from Winterfell in a weak holdfast, so that he might never be able to bare steel against Winterfell, and every time her husband had refused...and the mere thought of what she had done made her feel ill to the core.

And here it was, every year and every moment she had refused to be a mother to Jon, shown all in a single second in front of her, in that single callous act of the shewolf abandoning her pup to die and utterly unfazed by it. The Mother and the Father will never forgive me for what I have done. They
could forgive a woman who didn't want to be a mother to a bastard, to a boy who had no mother of his own, but not one like me, not one who tried to talk his husband out of treating him like a son, or one who tried to have her children treat him as a rival and not as a brother...gods have mercy...what have I done?

She swallowed hard, looking away from the others as she did. She couldn't bare the thought of what she had done, what she was doing, what horrible things she had done in her refusal to be his mother. ...I can't do it anymore. Not after that. He might not be my son, but neither are any of the others at Winterfell. None of them are my sons, but I have been a mother for them when I wouldn't be one for him.

She had to change. She could see it as clearly as the sun at the breaking of dawn...but how? How could she treat him as a son, when she had treated him so poorly for all those years before? Could he ever forgive her for what she had done...could she ever forgive herself?

Uncle, you cannot arrive soon enough. I have never needed your advice as much as I do now...help me make right the things I have done wrong.

Eddard nodded to his bastard son, to her failure, to Jon. "I will have Gage keep some milk warm for whenever he needs it, and have an extra blanket in your chambers to keep him warm at night."

She couldn't even look towards her beloved husband when he spoke anymore.

"Thank you, father," Jon replied with a grateful smile, the smile a loving son would give to his father, she hadn't even needed to look towards him to know he was wearing it. "I best go to the kitchens. The heat will do him good, and he needs something to eat just as much as I do."

Her husband led the way towards the kennels with Rickon's pup in his hands, Jon leaving them for the kitchens as soon as they left the godswood. It was almost time for dinner, she knew, but she hadn't an appetite, not after what she had seen the shewolf besides her do, not now that she realized what she herself had been so quick to do all those years ago when her husband had come home to her after the war and shown her his bastard son, so small and helpless just as the pup was. When they reached the kennels, her children talking amongst themselves with excitement as she stayed silent.

When they reached the kennels, Farlen was waiting for them, with the largest of the kennels opened wider than she had ever seen it before, filled with furs for them to sleep on and plenty of water for whenever it might be needed.

"They built these to hold direwolves, m'lord," he said with an eager smile, "It only took a little work to make them able to hold them again."

"Well done, Farlen," her husband began as the shewolf walked inside entirely of her own accord, as if she knew Catelyn never wanted to see her again. "Jon has a pup of his own, the smallest of the litter, but she's rejected him."

"Aye, m'lord, she'll be like to do that if he's the runt. So long as he keeps him fed and warm, the pup will be alright."

"Can we visit our pups?" Arya asked excitedly as she set hers down just past the kennel's gate, the shewolf walking over and picking up the tiny pup and carrying her across the room to the corner where she lay upon the rough-but-warm skin of a Northern cow.
"For a little while at most, but it'd be best not to," Farlen began, "If she's rejected one pup already, even if it was the runt of the litter, she might well reject any of the others."

_Not if I can help it._

"My lord," Maester Luwin said with only the highest respect as he shuffled towards them from his tower, holding a letter sealed with golden wax and stamped with the crowned stag of their king, Robert Baratheon. "A raven came for you not long ago."

Eddard passed the pup to Farlen and took the letter from the maester as their children passed their pups to the shewolf to let them rest for the evening. He snapped the golden seal and read quickly, starting with a smile as he read the words of his old friend...a smile that quickly fell away as his expression turned somber.

"My lord, what is it?" she asked, seeing the pain on his face.

"The Hand of the King is dead," he said grimly.

"I am sorry, my lord. I know he was like a grandfather to you."

Her husband sighed as he finished reading the letter and folded it back up.

"King Robert rides for Winterfell, and he will be here by the time the moon turns again."

_He must mean to name my husband his new Hand._

"Has my uncle joined his party?"

"Aye, he has," her husband replied. "And Tywin Lannister rides with him."


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_End of Part 15!

Chapter End Notes

And here is the summary...and the first thing off the bat is that Catelyn is very, very confused by the presence of the shewolf - she's having trouble understanding why the shewolf would choose to follow her instead of her husband or anyone else for that matter, and she words it better in the part than I can here in the summary : She doesn't understand why the direwolf would follow someone who isn't a Stark by birth, even though she married into the Stark family and has given birth to nearly half a dozen Starks at this point and is hoping - and trying - for a few more yet. A part of her doesn't see herself as worthy of a direwolf, another part is confused as to how a southron who keeps the New Gods instead of the old could have a direwolf...and then there is the realization that the shewolf's rejection of Ghost is the same as her own rejection of Jon Snow when he was still a baby.
The rest of that should be pretty self explanatory :) 

And of course, we see fight night first hand! :D It's an old tradition that has been revived, but even still its not quite as bloody as it was in the olden days of the Kings in the North - they actually make their fighters wear the most basic level of protection, the same things the ancient Greeks wore in their own boxing tournaments in our world, so that they don't risk causing any permanent damage such as blinding each other, brain damage, etc. Of course, if you were to go into a shady enough tavern you could definitely find people fighting without any protective gear whatsoever - that's the kind of stuff the Snowcloaks frown upon. But even with protective gear, it's still possible to get some pretty nasty wounds : Tygett's broken his fourth and fifth metacarpals due to the sheer force of the impact and the location he hit - this is actually easy enough to tend to in their era, since Maester Luwin only has to check to see if the bones are out of place, reposition them with light force if they are and then tie the last two fingers together to limit movement.

He doesn't even need any milk of the poppy or anything like that!

Using your legs is a perfectly valid tactic, but punches are generally the deciding factor in the fight, with grappling - but no eye gouging or anything like that - being allowed too. This has naturally led to the formation of a couple of different fighting styles, like Dacey's blitzkrieg approach that simply refuses give the opponent a chance to recover from the assault and keeps the pressure on; it's not decided by a single super-heavy punch like the Tygett/Jon fight, but by lots of medium-heavy ones to just smash through a man's willpower without giving him an opening for a counter attack.

Oh, and no points for guessing why Ol' Ned was uncomfortable after what Torrhen Karstark said :p

And then there is the stuff about the Winter's End festival. Every part of the Seven Kingdoms does it a little differently - the Reach would celebrate the planting season and Dorne does it by celebrating the landing of Nymeria and her refugees - but the North does it by focusing on one of the biggest and most important events in their history, the defeat of the Others at the end of the Long Night. Of course, it took place so long ago that all they know of the era has been passed down in campfire stories from one generation to the next, so things don't really much resemble the reality anymore, but some of the more iconic things, like ice spiders and frozen swords, are well known of, so they've survived to the present day and appear in the festival :D

At the time of the festival, the trade routes are starting to reopen after mostly closing for the winter, so it's a time where long missed commodities like southron fruits and wines start making their way back into Northern markets as the Westerosi economy starts to wake back up, so it's a time when the marketplaces are packed with goods both exotic and not, including a variant of what will eventually be known as an ice lolly, though it would probably seem to have more in common with a tiptop right now :p

Oh and the star player of Casterly Rock, Tywin Lannister, is coming to Winterfell with Robert Baratheon and the direwolf pups were born :D

If you've got any questions, just throw them my way and I'll try my best to answer them...so long as it doesn't spoil anything :)
Joy I

Chapter Notes

Well, it took longer to get here again than I had expected! :coldsweat: But regardless, here we are with the next part of the story, starting on the roads towards Winterfell!

Now, it might take me a little while to get my footing again, but not long, I assure you!

Now, let's get going! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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A month later, not far south of Winterfell...

Joy Hill sighed with a shiver as she shifted in the seat, glancing out the shuttered window of the lavish wheelhouse and seeing nothing but rolling plains of grey-green grass and an overcast sky full of thick clouds that the sun's light struggled to penetrate. Her eyes lingered on the seemingly perpetual twilight that bathed the northern lands of the Seven Kingdoms, the sun never quite seeming to truly shine in the way that it did in the south and in the west, nothing like the North where even the cold nights felt as though they were darker. It looked every part the grim land full of grim people that the stories and singers made it out to be, and made the bright colors of the royal retinue stand out all the more - Ser Barristan Selmy in his brilliant white cloak, riding alongside on a white destrier, his armor gleaming in the little light there was as though it were made of solid silver, King Robert Baratheon not far past him, the towering Demon of the Trident in his enormous sail of cloth gold and black that fluttered softly in the gentle winds, her cousin Jaime not far, shining in his golden armor, all three men and all the other knights and lords and ladies of their party the most colorful things in the land, from her to the horizon.

Only the thud of the wagon rolling over a lump in the road could break her gaze towards more colorful surroundings, and only the painful jolt it sent up her spine could snap her attentions back to the gold and crimson interior of the queen's wheelhouse, a place as lavishly decorated as any castle and bigger than the house of any peasant farmer, full of all the luxuries that a queen might need on her travels, masterfully constructed, but even here the cold of the outside could find its way in somewhere, through the narrowest opening of a door or the tiniest crack in the floor or wall. All around her were the women and young of the royal family, and their closest and most trusted attendants - Cersei, sat on the other side of the table that dominated much of the wheel house's first floor, a glass of wine in hand and a thick fur around her shoulders to protect her from the biting cold, next to whom was her only daughter, Myrcella, contentedly passing the time by practicing her needlework, sewing a great beast with two heads, one a lion and the other a stag, and opposite her was little Tommen, too young to ride such a great distance on his own without the risk of falling from his saddle, happily reading a tome that Maester Pycelle had given him to improve his reading - the saga of Eldric Shadowchaser, a Northern hero who had fought the Others in the Long Night, a story of burning swords and powerful sorcery.

"See anything interesting?" Princess Myrcella asked with a smile and a curious voice, taking her attentions from her sewing at last.

"Not this time," she said truthfully. Sometimes there were interesting sights on their way to
Winterfell, sometimes passing through towns and villages that dotted the countryside, or through meadows full of those furry cows the Northmen were fond of, even a merchant caravan on its way from one place to another or a recruiter of the Night's Watch and their band of rangers and recruits would sometimes pass them by on the road, but this time, there was nothing.

"I hope it isn't much further from here to Winterfell," the princess replied. "Do you really think it will be as big as the Northmen say it is?"

"It is," the queen said simply, taking a sip of her wine.

"You have been to the North before?" Myrcella asked with surprise, turning towards her queen mother.

"Once, with your great uncle Kevan and my brother Jaime," Cersei continued. "It was long before you or Joff were born, before Robert became king."

"How come?" Myrcella asked again with a freedom that Joy wished she could have. Bastard girls don't talk to princesses unless spoken to. "Did grandfather send you?"

"Of course he did," Cersei answered. "It was to see if my brother Jaime might take a liking to the Stark girl, Lyanna."

"Wasn't she father's betrothed before she died?"

"She was, but not then," Cersei said at last before taking another sip of her wine. "It would have never worked anyway; your uncle would have taken the black before having her as his wife. She was more a man than a woman, and neither of them had liked one another much either."

"Do the Northmen have burning swords?" Tommen asked with excitement. "Like Eldric did?"

For a moment, Joy thought Cersei was about to sigh or slump back into her seat from the question, but instead, she leaned forward with a mother's smile. "Not anymore, sweetling, but once..."

And with nothing more said, Tommen burst into an excited laughter and went back to his reading, his mother smiling a little more after that. Cersei was Joy's cousin, the beautiful and trueborn daughter of her uncle Tywin, and nothing at all like a bastard - she was proud where Joy was humble, fierce where she was meek and outspoken where Joy was quiet, as was proper for the natural daughter of a spare son, but Joy did not envy her, as no one cared whenever a Hill or a Snow made a mistake, as it was expected of them to do so for not having the blessing of the Mother and Father for not being conceived in a wedding bed, but a trueborn Lannister had no such fortune. Even if the uncle that had raised her had taught her to be ever careful of the errors that she might make, she knew that any mistake she made would never be able to be used against her father's family, only against her, and even then not for more than a few hours or days at most, not like with Cersei, whose failures would be seen as weakness of her family and talked about for years, decades or even centuries to come, long after either of them were dead, and even so much as speaking with the smallfolk would be enough to raise frightful rumors for a woman of her station, but for Joy...how could they, when she was half peasant herself? Her Lannister blood might have meant that she was to hold herself to higher standards, as she did, but it was not enough to get her the splendid treatment that a trueborn maiden from her house might have, and in that way, she was a bastard of two families - she was neither truly highborn or low, with the nobility disliking her for being a bastard and not of a truly noble blood, ignoring her except for the times they needed to speak with her or give their courtesies, whilst the common did so for her having a privileged upbringing in the first place, even if
It did not bother her much, not anymore, not since her uncle Tywin had told her how the world worked and the reason why she was treated the way she was when she had become old enough to understand, and why he would look after her even with the stain of bastardy besmirching her character, as family should, and the only question she might have had was whether or not her future husband felt the same. She already knew who it was that she was supposed to marry, her entire visit to the North was to try and arrange it, that she had been made very clear on, but she couldn't help but wonder if the bastard son of Lord Eddard Stark, Jon Snow, would be like her - would he be accustomed to waiting on his trueborn relatives, kept from their games but also similarly excluded from those of the common children? Would he be used to eating not at the dais but on the low table, surrounded by those who envied his station without realizing what it meant? Would he be trained and prepared for the role of a noblemen, but never given the responsibilities such an education was for?

The life of a bastard was a lonely one, but perhaps it might not be so lonely after all, and the thought of not being alone for once filled her with as much a feeling of comfort as it did unease for what the future might hold. What if he was cruel and hateful to her? What if he was planning to go to the Wall and take the black or cross the Narrow Sea to become a sellsword? What if he was already planning to marry someone else? She did not know, but she knew that bastard boys were the masters of their own fate in a way that no one else ever was, with all the freedom of any nobleman but none of the responsibilities, and that meant she might do everything that was expected of her exactly right and still go unwanted and unwed. Such thoughts were troubling, but not for a moment did she let it show. It was not proper for a bastard to show or express their feelings and views unless asked, after all, and she was nothing if not a proper young lady, fully aware of all the things that were expected of her: she could sing well, she could sew and dance even better, she could handle numbers and a household best of all, and though she was still a girl of ten and a few years away from her own flowering, her guardian uncle had seen fit to have her accompany a midwife for a week and so she knew exactly what happened in a birthing bed, the pain, the mess, the magic, the joy, the sorrow, she had seen all of it and she had learnt. With all that, she was ready for anything the world might bring against her, whatever surprises it had in store for - crack.

The timbers groaned and the wheelhouse shuddered with a loud crunching, before finally rocking hard and shaking all those within before striking the ground with a bang with a flurry of thuds from the floor above, not a single piece of furniture upon the ground floor moving from the places where the carpenters had hammered them down.

"Hells! Not again," the king shouted towards them, the entire retinue coming to a halt. "Cersei! Out! That wheelhouse of yours has broke another damned axle!"

Cersei seemed to sigh, then, setting her cup upon the table before rising from her seat and putting on another thick fur passed to her by a handmaiden even more quiet and unnoticed than Joy herself before starting towards the door, followed first by Myrcella and then Tommen and then Joy herself, the cold air of the world beyond the wheelhouse rushing in and chilling her before a servant brought over her own coat, a thick brown garment made from beaver pelts that stretched down no further than her waist before being replaced by red wool, able to keep her warm in the cold of the North even if it was not quite so fine as Cersei's fresh fox pelts. Another servant, this one a young man with neatly groomed dark hair and a tunic of black and gold cloth and thick leather breeches, kneeling down in the road with a large wooden step in his hands to ease their exit from the crippled carriage. As before, Cersei stepped down first before turning towards her brother Jaime, dismounted and amused, and the heir to the throne, the gold haired Prince Joffrey that stood besides, horses not far away, then her children went next and went off towards their uncle Tyrion, talking amongst
themselves, laughing quietly about the things they might say, and at last, Joy stepped down from the wheelhouse with short graceful movements, onto the road of damp grey cobblestone, still moist from the last time the summer snows had covered its surface only to melt under the rise of the afternoon sun, and rather than follow either the queen or her children to one of her cousins or the other, she moved to the side of the road, not stepping off into the mud but staying upon the edge, distant from those who mattered and those who might take affront to her presence, quiet...but watching. The attendants of the wheelhouse, those who looked after the horses and knew how to maintain and repair the carriage, rushed over with a number of wooden blocks, stacking them one by one on the broken side of the carriage, using them as a means to take the weight whilst they mended the broken axle, only for the blocks to slip and slide on the wet stone whenever the weight was put on them, unable to grip the smooth surface, leaving the servants helpless to raise the wheelhouse on their own.

The king laughed at the sight, unfastening his cloak before throwing it into the hands of Lancel Lannister, his squire, revealing an armored body so great in stature as to look as if the Warrior himself had stepped down from the heavens to come to their aid, a large giant six and a half feet tall, sharply groomed and strikingly handsome, towering over every other man in the party, even her uncle Tywin and her cousin Jaime, tall men both.

"Clegane, over here," he commanded, flexing gauntleted hands as the Hound came to his command with a quiet grumble, Robert then turning his attentions to the servants. "Place the blocks beneath once we raise it up enough for you to place them."

The servant nodded quickly...and just so, Sandor Clegane and King Robert Baratheon lifted the corner together with a heave and a groan, shifting the weight of the carriage so that it could stand on its three intact wheels without slumping over again. Quickly, the servants placed the blocks atop one another, stacking them to full height so that when the king let go again, the weight was distributed across all four corners of the wheelhouse, allowing them to finally start removing the broken axle. At that moment, a shadow passed over her with the sound of a horse walking to a halt, and she turned around to see her uncle, Lord Tywin Lannister, in travelling clothes of red and gold rather than armor like the king, sat high upon the saddle of his mount. She relaxed instantly, whatever discomfort she might have for being around people so far above her station disappearing in a heartbeat. Her uncle Tywin had taken on the task of raising her when no one else would after her father disappeared on his search for Brightroar, when even Joy's own mother had stopped caring for her and left, never to be seen in Casterly Rock or Lannisport again, not because of any love for her father or out of a sense of duty, but because she was family, and that was the only thing that mattered, even if she might have been an infant bastard girl at the time, someone who might give only a little to the Lannister name through her existence even once she was of age.

For that, she loved him like the father she had never had a chance to know.

"Uncle, why does the king travel in his armor?" she asked, allowing herself to speak first. "Other than the Kingsguard and a few of his retainers, almost everyone else are in their travel clothes, and it doesn't seem as though it would be proper for everyone to wear something so different from their king."

"His grace has always been known for his skill in battle, no doubt he finds himself more comfortable travelling in plate than he does in cloth," Tywin answered. "As for it not seeming proper, King Robert has always had little interest in setting trends of fashion, but if he so desired he could say a word and have every man in the realm of any importance in plate."

"All the more reason that I should count my fortunes, then," Joy said softly, a smile hint of mild amusement in her voice. "She leads the entire realm in what to wear, and having her like only one
kind of dress and one kind of shoe makes it easier to fill my wardrobe without emptying my coin purse."

"You jape, but that is so," Tywin said with all seriousness. "It is the king and his queen who make the fashion of the realm, them and no other. My daughter prefers Myrish lace to Naathi silk or Lorathi velvet, and so every maiden in the realm dreams of having a gown of Myrish lace, and King Robert likes his Dornish reds, and so everyone who can afford it has a bottle of Dornish red in his cellar."

"I wonder if the Stark girls will be wearing southern fashions," Joy said with a curious tone.

"They will most likely not," Tywin answered, his voice so certain as to make the words he spoke become facts. "The Starks of Winterfell rule the largest realm out of any of the crown's vassals, and have enough power to be more of an ally to the throne than one of its subjects. They will have heard of the crown's tastes and chosen to wear them or not, and the latter is more likely as my daughter's tastes are for the warm springs of the south, not here where it still snows in summer."

"It's amazing to think that they have managed to build a realm here," Joy said, glancing towards the west where she saw a small hamlet on the horizon that had not been able to see from the inside of the carriage before, a place of some two dozen houses that was surely one of Winterfell's outlying settlements or something of the sort. "It is so cold here that it snows almost every other day, and water freezes at night to ruin fruit, huddling beneath her coat for warmth. How did they do it, uncle?"

"How do the wildlings survive beyond the Wall?" Tywin countered, unfazed by the cold winds. "How do the Dornish live in a place that rarely rains and has little water? How do the Lhazareen do it, when their fields and villages are burnt by Dothraki khalasars every week? People adapt to the lands around them, niece, and the Northmen found a way to live here. No doubt they would ask the same question if they were in the mountains of the Westerlands, trying to find out how we grow enough food to last through winter."

There was a question in her throat, pleading to be asked and yet weighed down by the risk of speaking out of turn, even in front of her cherished uncle. He noticed it on her face, however, even despite her best attempts to veil her true feelings, and said more softly, "You may speak, Joy."

"Is it true that my cousins came here when the Targaryens still ruled?" Joy asked at last.

"It is," her uncle started. "Times were different, then, but the Lannisters of Casterly Rock and the Starks of Winterfell have been close friends for nearly three hundred years, but even before Aegon's Conquest, Stark and Lannister ships had worked together to keep the Ironborn at bay, just as they do now, a hammer and an anvil to smash the Iron Islands on should they decide to break the king's peace once more. The friendship between the North and the West has long been something from which the entire realm has benefited, however, with Lannister gold helping to pay for the canal that the Northmen built and with Lannisport benefiting the most from its construction."

"This is why you are to marry the Stark bastard," Tywin said at last. "There are only three great powers in this realm, and two of them together can make or break a king. My own father, Tytos, somehow managed to see that through his cups of wine and saw fit to marry your aunt to the Lord Darkstark, earning our family an influential friend in the northlands, but it is known that the Lord of Winterfell cares a great deal for his bastard son, and it will be your marriage to him that will make the Starks into our ally."

"So, Joffrey is here to find a bride to support the crown, and I am to marry the Snow to make an ally
for the Westerlands," Joy said with understanding. "That means the Baratheons, Lannisters and Starks will all be bound together in one alliance."

Then she saw the tiniest flutter in his cheek, the slightest hint of the smile that never-quite-was.

"Exactly so," Tywin said with a nod of approval. "You may not have the Lannister name, but you have a Lannister's blood and a Lannister's wit."

"Thank you, uncle," she said with a small smile and a slight bow, ever grateful for his approval. "I owe it to you."

Before her uncle could answer speak with her again, there was the soft clammering of the wooden blocks being kicked away, the wheelhouse standing upon its own wheels once more, and the king laughed heartily as he remounted on his black palfrey, Stormcloud, a large horse for a large man, and gave a shout with a powerful voice that could be heard even in the rear of the royal retinue.

"Come on, then! Ned'll start to wonder if we're even coming if we take much longer than we already have!"

In response to the king's command, the caravan began preparing itself to move once more, with trusted servants and the highborn men of the party helping the women not so fortunate as to be able to ride inside the wheelhouse onto their horses before mounting their own, Ser Barristan Selmy escorting the queen and her children back towards the wheelhouse whilst Ser Jaime stayed with Joffrey, the two already on their own horses and ahead of Sandor Clegane with his terrifying hound faced visor raised upright and Ser Brynden Tully even further behind, alongside the main body of the retinue and with his own personal crest, a black trout, clearly visible upon the surface of his cloak even from where Joy was standing.

But before she walked towards it, before she waited on the queen once more, she turned towards her uncle, silent and waiting.

"You may go," Tywin said at last. "But remember, your cousin has given you an opportunity to speak with her and her children in the wheelhouse and make powerful friends. You would be best to make use of it."

"Of course, uncle," she said in acknowledgement before turning towards the wheelhouse once more, walking with a smile before returning to her demure veneer as the queen ascended the wooden steps back into her carriage once more, followed first by Myrcella and then little Tommen, the same order in which they had disembarked, before Joy took her first step, gripping the small golden handrail that was part of the door for support as she stepped back inside the lavish carriage and made her way over to her chair, only sitting down again after her cousin Cersei had, as was proper. Taking the chance that her uncle had suggested to use, she went against her instincts and spoke first, as only a trueborn should, careful of her wording. "Your grace, since you have been to Winterfell before, would you say that we are not far from the city?"

"We aren't, thankfully," Cersei answered, picking up her wine cup from where she had left it as the carriage began to roll forward with the voice of a servant, a crack of a whip and a neigh of a horse. "The hills make it seem as though we are further away than we really are. Half an hour, or an hour full at most, so long as we do not break another axle on this road."

"Thank you, your grace," Joy said with a grateful nod and a smile. "And thank you again, for being so generous as to allow a bastard girl like myself to ride within your wheelhouse. It is an honor to be
"You are welcome, cousin," Cersei answered at last. "Your father was always my favorite uncle, just as he was Jaime's. He would be proud to see you as you are now. Are you looking forward to meeting your betrothed?"

"I do, but I wonder what kind of man he will be," she said, her words truthful. "He won't be a southron knight, that I know, and he will be a bastard like myself, but for all our plans of marriage I know so little about him as to only know his name and who his father is."

"I knew little more about my own husband when I was told that I was to marry Robert," Cersei answered, Myrcella slowing down her sewing to listen curiously in on the talk of marriage and weddings. "I had met him before, at Harrenhal, but he was more interested in his own betrothed then, the Stark girl, so we hadn't talked to one another much. But after the rebellion, she was dead and the new king was in need of a bride, so my father wed me to him, and all I knew about him then was that he had overthrown the Mad King and never lost a battle."

"Is that really all you knew about father when you were married?" Myrcella asked with amazement. "No...time spent learning about each other before the wedding? Like in the songs?"

"Life is no song, sweetling," Cersei said warmly, before answering more fully. "But no, the first time I saw him since Harrenhal was at the wedding. There was no time for anything else, as Robert had needed to wed quickly."

"It was to help bring the realm back to peace after the war, to make things start to seem normal again," Joy added for Myrcella, Cersei nodding to her daughter in agreement.

"Will I have any time to speak with my betrothed? Once I have one?" Myrcella asked, the combination of curiosity and unease clear on her young face. "I don't want to marry someone I don't really know." "You will have as long as you might like, and not even your father will be able to say otherwise should he try and wed you off to someone you do not want," Cersei replied, Myrcella letting out an sigh of relief as she relaxed into her chair and began sewing once more. "Nor you, Tommen."

"...will father fight the Others if they come south?" the youngest of the royal children asked, looking up from the hefty book.

"The Others are gone, Tommen," Cersei answered.

"But what about their spiders...?"

"Slain, if they ever existed at all."

"...and their ice dragons...?"

"The singers added those to make the stories seem more heroic," Joy said, the queen laughing softly before taking another sip of her wine. "All the best heroes slay dragons. Like Serwyn of the Mirror..."
"Like...father! He slayed a dragon!" Tommen laughed. "A dragon prince! Didn't he, mother? Didn't he?"

"...and he won't ever stop talking about it," Cersei sighed tiredly, no one more familiar with the King's proud boasts and war stories than her. "No doubt he will feel the need to the tell the tale a hundred more times once we reach Winterfell."

"Still...I do wonder," Joy said at last, thinking. "Have you any news at King's Landing about what Jon Snow might be like? Or what his father might mean to do with us once we are wed?"

"The Northmen have always liked to keep to themselves," Cersei mused, raising her glass for another drink. "They would be happiest of all if the rest of the realm was water and the North an island in the Sunset Sea, so that they might sit in their snow alone and drink their icewine without needing to bother themselves with anyone else. They have little interest in the goings on of the South or of King's Landing, so long as it doesn't affect them...and Robert doesn't mind it, either. Seven know how much he loves Starks, he would let them have the Riverlands as well as the North if Old Lord Tully and his son died."

"As for his father's plans," she said, tilting her glass slightly, eying the crimson liquid within, "I suppose he will give your husband what most other Stark bastards seem to get; a castle, mayhaps a village or two for income and a crest to call his own."

"Oh! You can be called Lannistarks!" Tommen said with excitement, glancing up from his book. "Joy and Jon Lannistark!"

Joy was tempted to shake her head at the sound of that potential name, but resisted.

"Mayhaps I will ask him to consider it," she said, glancing towards her cousin with a look in her eye that said it all - Tywin Lannister would never want it, and neither would Joy wish to insult him in such a manner.

"I hope our cousins are at Winterfell," Joy said at last, smiling as she remembered the last time they had met - her Aunt Genna had brought her children to Casterly Rock the year before, so that they could meet prince Joffrey for a feast in celebration of his twelfth nameday, and Joy had made sure to meet them all whilst she had the chance. Her aunt's husband had stayed behind, but all his children were there; the dutiful sailor Rodrik and his three children, Lynara, Benjen and Joanna, the first two of whom were near enough her own age, the brave Tygett and his dreams of being as great a swordsman and hero as his cousin Jaime, and the pretty twins Adara and Lyanne, the one lustful and daring and the other quiet and ever so shy, and not because of the desire to act proper and according to her station, either. She had gotten along with all of them splendidly, especially Lyanne with whom she had bonded over their shared nature of staying away from the attentions of others, but there had been one child of Lord Beron and Lady Genna that she had not been able to grow close with, and it was their second born son, between Rodrik and Tygett, Edrick...a bastard girl like Joy was not meant to be a judging person, never, but in her heart of hearts she felt that there was something not quite right about him, something wrong inside, and made sure to stay well enough away.

"The Northmen like to send their children to Winterfell as wards of the Starks, so they might be there," Cersei explained at last. "Not all of them, but some."

"Does King Robert know that you know so much about the North?"
"Of course not," Cersei smiled. "He likes surprises, so I think it is only right he gets one once we arrive."

"A greater surprise than seeing uncle Tywin paying a toll at Moat Cailin?"

Cersei laughed, then, proper laughter, and even her children did the same at the memory of their grandfather having to pay for his own passage into the North, as well as for those who were part of his retinue rather than that of the royal one. With a family name like Swampstark, it would be easy to think that the holders of Moat Cailin were simpletons or mudwearing madmen, but in truth they manned the battlements of the North's first and last line of defense, a fortress upon which the Andal Invasion itself had smashed like glass, and such fierce tenacity was shown by Lord Eddard Swampstark, Lord of Moat Cailin and Protector of the Causeway, that it was not hard to imagine man and castle alike being one the same, a pair of stalwart guardians who would never be conquered by any southerner, but who would gladly bend their knees and tip their banners towards the north to whom they were kin, and no better was that shown than in how he had the strength of courage to make the most powerful lord in all Seven Kingdoms pay a toll to cross beneath his gatehouse, despite the king to whom he had a marriage alliance being present alongside, despite over a dozen gold lion banners fluttering over head and despite the Lion of Lannister's fearsome reputation. Then he had taken the Lord Lannister's coins with neither humor nor pride nor anything of the sort, but the way a tax collector might go to a market and collect his lord's due, completely businesslike in manner and completely unmoved by Ser Jaime's suggestion to duel the best sword the Swampstarks had to offer for free passage if he won or a double fee if he lost, as well as Tyrion's attempts to reason with the Lord Swampstark about all the benefits of having the Lord of Casterly Rock as a friend, none of it would move him in even the slightest, and in the end the man had got his due and the royal retinue had feasted in the halls of Moat Cailin and spent the night there, the King laughing at it all the morning after as they continued their northwards journey to Winterfell.

"I would hope so," Cersei said at last, sipping her wine again and extending her cup out for a handmaiden to fill, the serving girls having followed Joy into the wheelhouse before it began to move again. "He still thinks Winterfell is just a castle and not a city. I see no reason to spoil the surprise."

"Is he the only one who doesn't know?" Myrcella asked with a curious but playing smile.

"Most of them haven't ever been to the North before," Joy answered. "I think we're the only ones who know."

"And I hope to keep it that way till we arrive," Cersei said with a gleam of mischief in her emerald eyes. "It will be more...entertaining this way."

"Seven hells!" came the king's laughing shout from outside. "When did he get the damned time to build that!"

"...and here we are," Cersei said at last, raising her cup for one last sip before their arrival. "Winterfell."

"Can I take a look, mother?" Myrcella asked, her mother nodding quietly before the princess rose from her seat and turned, towards the front most wall of the wheelhouse, where a small wooden step allowed her to rise up to the level of a small wooden slit in the wall, a viewport covered by a small wooden slat that was pulled to the side to make an opening through which light and fresh air could pass, or closed to keep the cold at bay...and at almost the instant she peeked through the opening,
wincing at the bright light of the outside world, she laughed. "It's...it's huge! I never thought it would be so large!"

"May I?" Joy asked hopefully.

"Of course," Myrcella smiled, returning to her chair and quickly starting to explain everything she had seen to her younger brother, who was still too small to see for himself, but Joy paid little attention to that, hearing her speak and yet not hearing the words, instead standing to see Winterfell for herself, with eyes that were familiar to the sight of the great city of the west, Lannisport.

What she saw was beyond her expectations, both her lowest and her highest.

Instead of the tall wooden wall atop a high rampart of earth or the stout barrier of cobblestone with a stake moat that she had imagined to surround the Northern capital, there were massive and proud walls of thick grey granite, mighty forms of masterful masonry that was an equal to any in the south and well maintained, too, with every merlon and every embrasure on every section of wall that her eyes could see in fighting condition, with even the little ports below for where the hoardings might be attached in times of war ready for their timbers to be inserted with little trouble, above great red runes that stared back at her like the crest painted upon a knight's shield. Then there were the towers, not small and spidery things of wooden logs or crumbling fortifications of mismatched stone, but grand structures just like those on the walls of Lannisport or any other great city, cylindrical in form with cross shaped holes in their surface from which the scorpions within could be aimed and fired at any attacking force, even against siege towers, and on every tower she saw a cone for a roof to protect the men inside from the harsh snows and biting winds, thin and daggers direwolf banners fluttering in the winds above just as a man in a dark green robe walked below, a watercart close behind, a priest blessing the fortifications to stand strong in the face of storm and siege, though what the water was for she could never know. Ahead of her on the path of the road was a gatehouse, a small castle in itself, so high and wide as to be able to accommodate the passage of the royal wheelhouse without much difficulty, a major feat in its own right as more than a few other castles had needed the great carriage to remain outside the walls lest it smash into the ceiling whilst trying to pass inside, and more than any other the gatehouse was the clear heart of the defense, flanked by two towers larger and more fortified than any others she could see, twice as wide but just as tall, trading the conical roofs of their comrades in exchange for catapults able to crush any attacker beneath a hail of stone boulders or a barrel of burning pitch and tiny rocks no bigger in size than her thumb.

But above it all, beyond it all, atop a large hill that would have once been home to a ringfort of the First Men was the citadel of Winterfell itself, a magnificent fortress with taller walls and taller towers and an immense keep safe of the same grey granite blocks as the rest of the castle, only larger, larger, an entire fortress of them, the largest castle she had ever seen in her life other than for Casterly Rock itself. Greater than the Golden Tooth she had passed on her eastwards journey, greater than Riverrun when they had stopped at it for the night before meeting up with King Robert's retinue, greater than Raventree Hall and its huge black wierwood, greater than the ruined seat of the Mudd kings at Oldstones, greater than the shield of the Riverlands that was Seagard and greater than the dual river crossing castles of the Twins, all of them were like young boys compared to a man full grown, and it was obvious from even where she was that a lack of space had been no consideration of the castle's builders, no, they had all the room in the world to make a strong fortress, and the sight of it reminded her more of the stories and tales she had heard of Highgarden than not. But unlike Highgarden, when the wolf faced gate opened to allow them to enter inside the walls, there was a city within, a wealthy city where the houses were large and the roads covered in stone, where veritable flocks of eagles soared above and landed on the rooftops, watching as the king raised his hammer hand as a clenched fist, as if he was holding it over his head, bathing in the chant of the crowd as they shouted his name with what could only be the sound of adoration, and half a hundred
other names the Northmen had for the man who had been their closest ally, Robert Rubycrusher, Robert Princekiller, Robert Dragonslayer, all of them were words that she heard shouted, and all of them were words the king welcomed with a grin and a boisterous laugh.

"As strong as a direwolf..." she murmured under her breath, echoing words that her uncle had once said to her years before. "...and as good to have on one's side."

"Are you going to stand there till we reach the castle?" Cersei asked with amusement.

"Sorry, your grace," Joy said apologetically, returning to her seat...and leaning close towards the shuttered window, so she could see the crowds passing by as the carriage rolled along. "They do love our king."

"He is the first king to have visited Winterfell in years," Cersei dismissed. "They would cheer the Mad King Aerys or Baelor the Blessed if either of them were the one on that horse instead."

Joy nodded in understanding...and noticed something odd amongst the crowd, for as the king passed them by and the wheelhouse rolled along, people seemed to gawp at the one who rode behind, and she knew that was Tyrion Lannister. And as she looked out amongst the crowd, she noticed something else.

There were no dwarfs here. Not a single one.

"Your grace," Joy asked with concealed surprise. "Why are there no dwarfs here?"

"This is the North, cousin," the Queen answered. "What do you think a mother does to her deformed child, when the cold winds rise and the snow falls thick? When one mouth too many might mean an entire family could starve and die in wintertime?"

Joy looked back at her royal cousin, then, with cold realization.

"You mean they...?"

"Of course they do," Cersei replied with a low voice and an understanding of their reasoning. "Only the highborn can afford to have dwarfs, here. For a smallfolk, they are burden. Have you ever heard a maester's tales about the time of the First Men, cousin? How their clans lived?"

"Every time a babe was born, their father would pluck them from their mother's breast and look them over, looking for deformities that might weaken the clan," the queen said as she eased into her chair. "If they saw them...they would make it quick, I imagine. So they wouldn't suffer."

Tommen and Myrcella were visually uneased by what their mother had said, the young prince more so than his elder sister, but to Joy...it made sense. Hard and fierce places like the North and the lands beyond the Wall meant that the people there were hard and fierce also, entirely capable of making hard choices that would seem abomination in easier and softer lands and peoples, and if the choice was between having a useless dwarf, a mouth that would need to be fed but one who could not hunt to feed others or build shelter or craft tools, or having no such dwarf and having more food to go around for healthy children who would be able to grow up into strong and healthy men and women able to do such things...then the choice was clear, wasn't it? That the dwarf should be sacrificed for the good of the clan? That the needs of the many must come before that of the one?

Then why did her uncle look after her, when no one else would?
Joy wasn't so sure about the ancient Northmen killing their dwarfs, nor, yet alone the present ones doing the same, but she set the thought of the dark matter of the past aside and recomposed herself to focus on the matters of the present, for the time she would meet her betrothed. She did sums in her head to soothe her nerves, and went over the words she would say to him the way a mummer might recite their lines for their time on the stage or how a knight might practice their slashes for a coming battle, and rubbed her hands over one another, warming her cold fingers before finally sliding her hands into a tiny pocket in the side of her dress, the place every lady has to keep their coin purse and other small items, before pulling out a tiny mirror with a good quality reflection, albeit with a surface no larger than three inches across. Despite the stain of bastardry and the curse of having a lowborn mother, she still looked more like a true Lannister than not, if perhaps more like a Lannister of Lannisport than a Lannister of Casterly Rock - her hair were thick shoulder length curls of sandy blonde and her eyes were a dark shade of blue, compared to Cersei's golden locks and emerald eyes, a look that had removed any doubt as to who was the most beautiful woman in all Seven Kingdoms years before when she had first become Robert's queen not long after the end of the rebellion. With the touch of the back of her fingers, she moved a small curl of hair that had fallen out of place in the winds of the outside world back into its proper place, examining herself more closely to make sure that everything was perfect for when she met the one who might be her future husband, her dress and coat in particular...and she smiled as she saw that aside from a few small creases, there were no marks or other such things that could spoil her looks, no small stains of wine or specks of dirt or anything of the sort that could risk embarrassing her or her family in front of the king and the lords of the North. She glanced at herself in the mirror again, putting on a truly ladylike expression, that of a delicate and innocent but beautiful maiden, the look that the statue of the Maiden herself had in the sept of Casterly Rock, a small and gentle smile...

...and then, at last, she felt a jerk beneath her legs and feet as the carriage rolled to a stop again, this time under the driver's command, the clattering of horse's hooves coming to a stop.

"And we are here," Cersei said at last, rising from her seat once more, her children swiftly following and heading towards the door just as they had before, only this time in a far more formal manner than before, and one that Joy made sure to mimic, appearing entirely certain of her actions on the outside even if she was still fearful of a mistake inside.

Then the door opened, the wooden step already in place, Ser Jaime Lannister stood besides to help them dismount. Air that felt a dozen times colder than it had been outside the city rushed inside, the oil lamps that lit the wheelhouse flickering from the sudden gust of cold just as she shivered beneath her dress and cloak, Joy biting down beneath her delicate smile in order to mask her discomfort. She walked along as elegantly as she could, following the queen and her children out of the wheelhouse and down the steps and onto the courtyard, taking her cousin Jaime's hand to help her down, where the grey eyes of a hundred Northmen were on her, standing near her cousin and yet apart, closer to her uncle Tywin than not, and all this in deathly silence, the entire courtyard so quiet that not even the birds were making any noise, yet alone the great numbers of Stark men she saw all around her - men-at-arms on the battlements and at the foot of the castle's own walls, vassal lordlings and young maidens who had been raised alongside the Stark's own children, all of them from the eldest boys who were almost men grown to the youngest girls still years away from flowering into maidens, all were on one knee with their eyes facing towards the ground beneath them, and so were the Starks themselves, the dark haired Lord of Winterfell knelt alongside his lady-wife and all his children, his three sons and his two daughters all there in the order of birth, from eldest to youngest...and the bastard Snow was there too, and just like her and her family, he was stood a little further away than the trueborn children, but closeby all the same, looking towards the ground like them and unable to see her, but she could see him and she saw a man who was his father writ small, with the same brown hair, the same shape of body and even the same shape of face, from what little she could see
of him. He was young, only four years older than Joy herself, with all of the lankiness and leanness that came with a boy growing into a man, but from him her eyes fell to the small dog besides him, an animal of white fur and red eyes, different looking from any dog she had ever seen before, in a way she could not truly place. Was this a wolf when it was still a pup growing? Perhaps even a direwolf, even? Her maester and her septa both had told her that such animals were long gone from the world, like the Targaryen dragons were, but if the North was remote enough to keep a great city such as Winterfell hidden from the rest of the world, then perhaps... perhaps they too were wrong?

Whatever attention she might have been able to pay to him was turned towards the king, however, as the towering Robert Baratheon dismounted his horse and allowed a serving boy to take the reins and lead it onto the stables, striding over towards the kneeling Lord of Winterfell like a demigod walking amongst mortals.

He stood in front of him then, quiet, looking over his vassal lord for just a moment before speaking.

"Rise," the king said, and rise the Stark and all their men and wards did, climbing to their feet once more with a clamor of feet and the clatter of armor and the flutter of cloth, something that let her see that Jon had the same grey eyes and the same long face of his father, too.

"Your grace," the Lord of Winterfell started with a low, respectful and entirely formal voice, echoing through the tense and quiet courtyard as only a solitary voice could. "Winterfell and all its hospitality is yours."

For a moment, there was silence again, the King considering his words.

"You got fat," the king said, glancing at the Lord of Winterfell's middle.

"Aye," came the Stark's grim reply...

...and then there was laughter, and the two men hugged like long lost brothers, and whatever unease there was in the air faded in an instant. A throng of servants came through the retinue, then, carrying wooden boards covered in clay bowls full of hard and almost cracker-like bread and shards of finely milled sea salt, the traditional offerings of a lord providing guest right, and every man and every woman in the royal retinue took their piece, with even Tommen making sure to take a piece of both, if perhaps small ones for his youth.

With that, the king clapped the Lord of Winterfell on the shoulder. "Where in the hells did you get all the time to build this, Ned? You never mentioned having a damned city!"

"We Northmen are humble, your grace," Lord Eddard Stark answered with a bow of his head.

"You could have told me when we were in the Vale," the king laughed, giving the Lady Stark a warm hug. "Cat!"

"A pleasure to see you again, your grace," Lady Catelyn Tully answered as the king let her go.

And on the king went, to the eldest trueborn son of Winterfell, a young man of the same age as his bastard brother, only with his mother's looks rather than his father's. "You must be Robb."

"I am, your grace," the heir of Winterfell answered, bowing in fealty before shaking the king's hand firmly. "An honor."
"You might look more like your mother," the king said, "But I'll be damned if you don't take after your father."

Robb laughed, then, only to fall silent again and straighten himself as his lady mother glared, and so the king went onto the next one in order, Eddard Stark's eldest daughter. "And you must be Sansa."

"I am, your grace," the young Stark maiden answered, giving her king a curtsy. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Mayhaps you will wed my son and join our houses in alliance," the king said warmly...only for the Lady Sansa to stare back at him the way a doe might its hunter, only to look towards her mother and father the moment the king walked over to the younger pair of Stark children, King Robert crouching down in front of Eddard's second trueborn son and daughter.

"And who are you two?" the king asked with a smile.

"My name is Arya," the young girl said...before adding, almost as an afterthought, "Your grace."

Joy couldn't help but think how long she would be punished for such a slight. A month? A year? A decade? But the king simply laughed, seeing exactly what kind of girl she was from the mistake, and mussed her hair before turning his attentions onto her brother. "And you?"

"Brandon, your grace," he said with a practiced voice. "An honor to meet you. My father told me how you killed Rhaegar with your hammer."

"Aye, did he now?" Robert asked, smiling as he looked towards his friend before turning his attentions back towards Brandon. "What say I tell you and your brothers war stories after dinner? He wasn't there at Summerhall, and gods, what a battle that was. We smashed three armies in a single day there, one right after another."

Brandon seemed to go almost wide eyed at the King's offer, and nodded quickly. The king rose to his feet...and then looked to see the great crowd of brown haired and grey eyed Northmen and Northwomen, amazed.

"Gods be good," Robert murmured as he looked over the collection of Northern youth, an army of noblemen and women gathered for him to see, lowering his voice for the first time since their arrival. "Are these all yours, Ned?"

Joy almost laughed, then.

"These are my wards, your grace," Eddard explained, turning his hand "It is tradition for the lords of the North to send some of their children here to Winterfell, so that they might grow amongst those their own age and those who will someday rule the North alongside them."

"Well, greetings to you!" the king said, laughing as he shook every hand that could reach him.

Then, when every greeting was done, when there was nothing else to do, all the joy seemed to go out of the King of the Seven Kingdoms who was famed for his jovial, and he met Lord Eddard Stark's eyes...and whatever it was that the Lord of Winterfell saw in them, it killed whatever joy he might have had from the King's arrival, and replaced it with an aching grief.

"I would like to pay my respects," Robert said at last, saying nothing more.
From there, the Lord of Winterfell simply nodded, and the two men walked off together. Cersei seemed ready to say something for a brief moment, but she said nothing and for the tiniest second, Joy thought that it was not because of any sense of love for her husband or any realization as to how the king felt, but because her own father was stood besides her...and there were few men in the world who knew and understood the king's pain in that moment than the Lord of Casterly Rock, a man who had also lost the woman he loved more than anything else so many years before. She could respect and admire the king for doing what he did, then, even if it was perhaps not entirely proper or courtly to do such a thing so soon after arriving and after so long a journey. But with the departure of the king and the Lord of Winterfell to whatever tomb was that of Lady Lyanna Stark, the formality that had dominated the courtyard began to melt away as some semblance of normalcy began to descend upon the courtyard, slowly at first with the servants coming to take the belongings of their guests to their bedchambers and then more quickly as the royal retinue beginning to meet with their Northern hosts for the first time, some heading into the city to see what this strange mirror of Southron life might offer.

"Come along, niece," her uncle said at last as Myrcella and Tommen went towards the younger Starks to speak with them, leaving the Stark bastard alone for the time being. "It is time for you to meet the man who shall be your groom."

"Of course, uncle," she answered with a slight bow, and followed, walking alongside the Lord of Casterly Rock towards the Snow, who looked around, seemingly trying to find something to do, direwolf at his heels. Then he saw the two of them, saw the two of them walking towards him, and realized.

"Greetings, my lord," he said with the same practiced voice as his trueborn siblings, if perhaps not quite as perfect, the Snow seeming to shrink back a little as the tall and stoic Tywin Lannister stood before him, his shadow falling across the bastard's face. "I am Jon, Jon Snow, Lord Stark's bastard son. Is there something I may help you with?"

"I would like to introduce you to my niece, Joy Hill," the Lord of Casterly Rock answered, Jon's attentions going to Joy almost instantaneously, the meaning of his words plain. "She is the bastard daughter of my brother Gerion, and is almost of an age to wed."

"A pleasure to meet you, Snow," she said with all the warmth she could muster. "I have heard much about you in Casterly Rock, though less about your home."

"News from the North takes time to reach the south," Jon answered, with Joy feeling that he was at a loss as to what else to say, seemingly taken completely by surprise by her presence. "Most southrons know little about us but what the singers and stories say."

And just so, she pounced on the opening, just as her uncle would have wanted her to. "The city looks a wondrous place, but not one a lady should go without an escort. Would you be so kind as to give me a tour, so that I might be able to find my way around for the rest of our stay here?"

"Of course, my lady, if the Lord Lannister wouldn't mind us doing so," Jon replied.

"I have matters to attend to with your lord father," Tywin answered with as voice as firm as his words were deft, playing his part well. "I see no harm in it."

Then Jon offered his arm, and Joy took it with an amount of reservedness that was entirely proper, smiling as the lovestruck maids in the songs and stories were supposed to do, even if her blush was
more from the cold than not. "Shall we go, then?"

"Where do you wish to go first?" Jon asked.

"Shall we go to the market?" she asked with a smile as the two started to walk together, leaving her uncle behind.

She was on her own, now, and every word she said and every move she made would have to be one that was the result of careful thinking if she was to do what her uncle wanted her to do, and so she thought. More news made its way to the South than the Starks seemed to know, if perhaps distorted by the act of it being passed from one person to the next, but it was enough for her to have some idea of what topics to speak of, what to say and what not to say...and for now, all she had to do was learn as much about him as possible, so that she might learn if a marriage between the two of them might be possible at all, if he planned to go to the Wall or travel to Essos as a wandering sellsword or anything of the like.

"So, Jon, have you ever travelled outside the North before?"

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End of Part 16!

Chapter End Notes

I told you we would be back! :D

It's been a long time coming, a very long time for that matter, as I've needed to go round the story circulation wheel, but we are here again, at least until part twenty, and to prevent such an absurdly long delay again - and I myself am fully willing to say that, because I've had an extremely busy year in real life and got a lot of important stuff done - I'm going to be scrapping my existing story rotation system, replacing it with a new one: instead of rotating every five or so parts, I will rotate after every single part - so if this was the start of the new system, the next part would be a Dragon of Harrenhal one, then one for a Northern Dragoness, then one for a Broken Star or any of my other large projects before coming back here, with room for minor stories between each group of two.

This won't be coming into effect until sometime after the end of this batch of parts, so don't worry, you've still got my complete attention for quite a while longer, but what this means is that in the future you will never need to wait what must have been an entire year for another group of parts, only a week or two at the most, something that I am sure you will all be happy to know about.

And now, onto the summary!

In this part, the royal retinue arrives at Winterfell, after a rather lengthy trek across the Seven Kingdoms by land up the Kingsroad :p

And we get to see Joy Hill, the girl who is expecting to be Jon's betrothed! As you can probably tell from her PoV, she's...rather different from most of the other female
characters that we've seen in the story so far. Rather than being like wild Arya, strong Sansa, quiet Lyanne or wanton Adara, she is a bastard who has been treated [I]like[/I] a bastard for the entirety of her life, never once getting for even a moment the sort of feeling that Jon might have of being almost trueborn in how people treat him - if Jon is a subversion of the traits of a bastard, then Joy is them played straight, closer to his canonical character than not. More than that, she was raised by none other than her uncle Tywin Lannister and so takes after him a great deal as a result, being made from some rather stern and strong stuff, but she is also entirely committed to the expectations that the Westerosi nobility might have of her, and so acts accordingly: as a bastard girl, someone who doesn't truly belong to either the nobility or the smallfolk, she is a bit of a lonesome character, but one who is entirely able to relax around some people, such as the uncle who raised her and to whom she shows deference in all things. I had thought about expanding the part above to include a little bit more, showing a scene with them in the marketplace getting to know one another a bit more, but I had a bit of trouble actually implementing said scene in that, due to its nature as one character asking questions and the other answering them, it tended to come out rather dry and repeat a lot of the stuff that earlier parts covered and I already basically had that same feeling already present in the part above - if people want to see that, however, just say, and I will put it together as an edit of the part above.

And of course...we have the first time a southron character sees Winterfell! :D

Information about the North does regularly reach the south, but it is often twisted by the journey by the time it reaches the nobility, and the more disconnected you are from the system, the further you are from the North, the more what you hear is twisted by the journey, as is mentioned in the part above - the south knows that the North has cities, for example, and knows that they have castles and so on, but they have little idea what these cities might actually be like, since the word "city" is actually rather vague in a medieval setting due to the nature of a city simply being a town that has been given a charter and allowed to do so, and that could range from anything like Fairmarket (if the riverkings decided to try and not stifle its growth to avoid being eclipsed by their own vassal, as is mentioned in WOIAF) to King's Landing or even to the scale of one of the Free Cities of Essos. All this means that views on the power of the North vary - there are some who think that it is stronger than it is here, some that think that it is weaker than it is here and some that think it is basically as strong as it is in canon. The Lannisters in general are some of the most informed about the actual situation of the North, due to having extensive trade relations with them and having aided the construction of the canal, but Joy unfortunately doesn't have access to that kind of information, due to being a bastard with the status of being a bastard.

And with that the summary is done and I say Merry Christmas! :D
Beneath Winterfell...

If there was ever a place in Winterfell that had not changed over three hundred years of peace and prosperity, three hundred years of growth and development, Eddard knew that it was the crypts beneath the castle. The passing of time had not changed them in the slightest, nor had the increased wealth of the Starks, and he could still remember being told the same when he had first passed through the ironwood door into the place beneath Winterfell at the side of his father, who had once told him the story of how his own father had once taken him below the surface to visit the crypts just as he had done with Eddard and his brothers and his sister, telling the four of them how ancient and old they were...and the crypts had changed little since then, gaining not even dust in the thirty years that had passed since that day he walked besides a father and a brother and a sister that had long since gone below never to come out again. Everywhere he looked, everywhere the Lords of Winterfell who had come before him had looked, the stones were the same, the same blocks of deep grey granite, and the mortar that held them together was the same, as were the statues and swords of grey iron that were laid across their laps to keep their spirits at bay, sheathed blades that told them that their duty to house and kin was over and done and that they might now be able to rest.

There was even the same silence as there had been then, the ceiling of the crypts made from slabs of masonry so thick as to be able to muffle out the sounds of the city above and even Robert had an unusual grim demeanor about him so far from the sun's light, an expression that Eddard had never seen him wear before, not even in the cold and quiet emptiness of the Eyrie so far away from all the normal warmth and noise of a normal castle like Winterfell or Storm's End. In such a quiet place, the only sound he could hear was that of their footsteps against the hard stones beneath their boots, echoing off the walls and down the steps into the lower levels of the crypt, where the oldest Lords of Winterfell and the Kings in the North who came before them were buried, and where a cold breeze rose from deep beneath the earth to make the light of his torch flicker and the cloak of Stark and Baratheon alike flutter.

Even Eddard had never been to the bottom of the crypts. He had tried to once, on one of Brandon's dares, but the cold had grown more and more intense with every floor of the descent and the flame weaker and the shadows closer, till by the seventh floor it felt as cold as wintertime and their torch had become as bright as a weak candle, the darkness all around like claws and the freezing air blowing past them like the breaths of some great frozen beast...and so they had turned back, no further down than the tomb of King Brandon Shadowslayer, who slew the last shadowcat in the North with his bare hands after it had attacked him whilst he was out hunting in the wolfswood, forcing his entire arm up to the shoulder inside its mouth the moment it opened its jaws to bite, unable to close them again on so large a thing all whilst it was being pummeled with his free hand before it finally choked and died. He had walked around with its skull on his shoulder in times of both peace and war after that, or so the legends said and as the statue had shown. They had tried to go deeper than that on a few times, but had trouble even making it that far ever again, the cold killing their torches and making its way through thick furs with far too much ease for them to get so far, and Brandon had eventually lost interest in going into the lower levels of the crypts in favor of going into the "lower levels" of whichever girl had taken his fancy at whichever brothel had managed to draw his attentions and hold them for however long.
Times were different, then, and he set such thoughts aside when he saw the stones on the floor grow familiar as they reached the newest group of tombs in Winterfell's crypts, Eddard recognizing all the statues around him instantly. His confident brother Brandon, standing tall with a teasing smile on his stone face and with his elbows resting upon the crossguard of the sword that was embedded into the stone at his side, another made from iron inside a sheath of stone at his hip, a stone wolf sat alongside, every statue having a direwolf even if they had not had them in life. Opposite him was their father, Lord Rickard Stark, sat in a granite throne with eyes as firm and strong as those of any king and with a direwolf sat besides, alert and ready to hear his master's commands, but more than anything else he and the bare blade of an iron sword across his lap, as if denying guest right to the spirits of the old kings who ruled the lower levels of the crypt...or as if to deny the living comfort in this dark place, until it was their time to join their kin below.

And just past him was the newest statue of all.

Lyanna.

She had not aged a day since he had last saw her, none of them had, no matter how much he might have wished otherwise, and whereas in life she had always been ever moving and ever busy with something or another, ever talking to a friend or to the smallfolk who surrounded their home, it was there that the masons had made their one error; they had given her the right face and the right body, but the wrong life, the sculpture standing atop her pedestal with a somber and silent stillness that was not at all how she had once been. He had always meant to have the statue taken down, to have it replaced with one that was more accurate to her nature, but that sombre faced girl who stood before him was exactly how he last remembered her, exactly how she had been when she realized what was happening and when the warmth had left her body, and that made the sight of her resting place sting all the more.

"She looks how I remember," Robert said grimly as the two men came to a stop in front of her, the king looking up towards the statue with sad eyes and a sad face so utterly unlike his normal, boastful self. "I remember those eyes, that tousled hair. I remember her at Harrenhal, laughing when I drove those boys away from Howland Reed."

"We all do, your grace," Eddard answered quietly.

"Did you have to put her down here in this darkness?" Robert asked, not once taking his eyes from hers. "She should be in the sun in that city of yours, surrounded by winter roses. She loved winter roses."

"It was her wish to come home," came the reply of the Lord of Winterfell. "This is her place."

"Her place was with me," Robert said, his voice little higher than a whisper, and for the briefest moment Eddard thought he saw a tear glisten in the orange light of his torch on the king's cheek. "I never wanted that damned throne, Ned. I fought for her. Every blow of my hammer was to bring her back again. I got what I never wanted, and lost what I did."

The king sighed then, and reached into a long leather pouch affixed to the side of his still armored waist, a place where most knights might keep their coin or a small carving of the Warrior to take into battle with them or anything else that they considered too precious to leave behind in their camp, and though he could not see what the king put into his left hand, he saw what went into his right, a wooden box half the length of Eddard's forearm, and raised the lid with a flick of his armored finger...revealing that, inside, there was a silver bracelet dotted with sapphires, a band of prancing stags and running direwolves, alongside a single winter's rose, as bright a blue as the sky at noon.
The king placed the band upon her wrist and the rose inside its box at her feet, then returned to his full height, seeming to stand taller than he had a moment before, as though a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders, and finally he turned to Eddard again, more at ease with himself than he had been in years, and the two started towards the surface once more.

"I didn't just come here to pay my respects to her, Ned," the king finally said as they began to move away from her resting place, getting to the topic that Eddard knew he would go to eventually. "I came here for you."

He reached out with his left hand, opened it...and revealed a clasp of a golden hand, one of many badges of office that belonged to the Hand of the King.

"I want you to come south with me, Ned," Robert said. "Jon Arryn was a father to the both of us, and my Hand as well. He held the realm together for fourteen years -"

"Robert," Eddard said, cutting off his friend before he could sway him with his famous charisma. "My place is here in Winterfell. The realm is vast, and -"

"Winter is coming," Robert acknowledged, before replying. "I'm not asking you to run the damned kingdom for me, Ned, not as Jon had whilst I wasted my life whoring and drinking my way towards an early grave."

Eddard blinked.

"...you've given up wine?" he asked in stunned disbelief. "What is happening, Robert, for you to give up wine and women? Not even Jon could make you do that."

Then without hesitation or thought the king raised his left hand, looking at his own reflection in the steel...and then he reached into his thick black hair and plucked out a single strand, showing it towards his closest friend as though it were a bloodied dagger.

What should have been a black as dark as charcoal was as grey as iron.

"I'm aging, Ned," Robert said quietly. "Jon's death made me realize it. I'm not so young as I once was, Ned, and I will be damned if people think of me as a drunkard king as often in my cups as Aerys was in his madness when I am gone."

"No one would ever call you that, Robert," Eddard said honestly. "You are nothing like him."

"Aye, but I want the singers to say that mine was a good reign, Ned. I won't have them comparing me to him or to Rhaegar or to any other damned Targaryen for that matter and saying that I was a pisspoor ruler," Robert said. "I want to take the realm and make it great, and I want you at my side to do it with; wolf and stag, Stark and Baratheon, together again. As it should have been from the start."

"What about your brother, Stannis? Why not make him Hand?"

"He fled to Dragonstone not long before Jon Arryn died," Robert said. "Besides, he would be a worse Hand than that fool my niece is fond of. Jon Arryn was clever enough to know that the loyalists needed to be forgiven to heal the realm, whilst my brother would have had us marching on Highgarden."
"What of Tywin Lannister?" Eddard reasoned. "He is a fair if harsh man, and made a good Hand for Aerys."

"Because if there are any more Lannisters in the Red Keep they might as well take my banners down and put theirs up," the king laughed. "Now come on, Ned! Take the damned title and come south with me. Robb will learn how to run the land on his own without you behind his shoulder, and I'll give that bastard of yours a place at court too if he wants one, mayhaps a place in the Kingsguard once Ser Barristan passes."

"I have other plans for Jon," Eddard said honestly. "I mean to give him a castle of his own and lands as well, so that he might found another cadet branch of the family."

The king looked at him then, thinking.

And then Robert smiled.

"Tell you what, Ned," Robert said. "Serve as my Hand for five years of summer. Should the maesters say winter is coming, then you can go back to Winterfell and wait it out with your family and come back to the Red Keep when spring arrives again. When those five years are done, you can go back to Winterfell or stay with me as my Hand, without complaint or question. Do this, and I will legitimize him and give him and his lands my blessing. It will give him and his house a strong start, and there is not a lord in the realm who would consider a man that the king has given his own support to as a poor groom."

Eddard was more than tempted at such an offer, and it was because what the king said was right - the support and recognition of the crown would give Jon and his line an incredibly strong start in that the nobility of the realm would be more willing to accept his rise, more willing to respect him as something separate from the Starks of Winterfell and as the head of his own house. Such a boon would last for generations, making it all the easier for Jon and his own sons and grandsons and great-grandsons to find brides of their own and for their sisters to find worthy husbands without needing to pay so great a dowry as to beggar their line...and that ability to stand on his own was more important than anything, for whilst Eddard was willing to support Jon in establishing himself as lord and was sure that Robb was willing to do the same, would Robb's sons and grandsons feel the same way? Would they have the same bond that their forefathers had and look after their cousins when they needed help? Or would they cut them loose and allow them to thrive or fail by their own merits?

Such a thing had happened before, on more than one occasion, and there were five times as many failed branches of the Stark line as there were successful ones - the Townstarks who had lived in the city rather than the castle, just as the Lannisters of Lannisport did, only to instead die out after losing all their wealth in a mere four generations after their founding by living beyond their incomes and be subsumed into the regular population when the mainline was unwilling to drag them out of their mess, and there had been others before them; the Rockstarks of the northern mountains who failed to find a strong income of their own, the Northstarks who had dared to settle beyond the Wall only to disappear without a trace and so many others...indeed, Eddard was sure there had even been an extremely short lived branch of Stepstarks who came from one bastard's ideas to try and conquer part of the Stepstones with the support of the North, only to die in the first battle by slipping on the deck in a harsh wave and being carried overboard and into a watery grave by the weight of his armor.

But that was only a family legend, as far as he knew.

"I will think about it, your grace," he said, his words truthful.
Instantly, Robert clapped him on the shoulder with a warm smile. "Aye! Now that's the Ned I remember! It'll be good to have you in the South, it'll be just like old times again...and more fun, too. Say what you will about that pile of swords the Targaryens called a throne, it is lonely at the top."

"Your grace?"

"In the rebellion I could ask people for advice if I wasn't sure how to proceed, and men would call it wise to take the advice of others rather than risk everything in uncertainty," Robert explained. "The moment the High Septon put that crown on my head people started to see it as weakness, as if I had no damned idea what I was doing, as if I was ruled by my council and not the other way around."

"They won't say that when you are there, though," Robert finished. "Everyone in the realm knows you and I are as brothers. They won't question it."

There was quiet, for a moment.

Then Robert asked a question of his own, wanting the first council from the man he hoped would become his Hand.

"What say you of conquering the lands beyond the Wall?" Robert asked eagerly. "Take a thousand swords from every realm, second sons who have no lands of their own, and we could make the realm into eight kingdoms instead of just seven, or nine kingdoms if we take Andalos too. Mayhaps even ten kingdoms if we claim the Stepstones."

"Do the Lysene not lay claim to those lands, your grace?"

"They do," the king smiled. "But if we build more war galleys, then they wouldn't want to risk a fight and would be smashed even if they did."

The king looked on, then, smiling widely as he imagined the glories that were to come, before bringing his attentions to the present once more as they came towards the staircase that connected the highest level of the crypt to the surface world, where the cold air of the outside world was blocked from entering by a thick door of ironwood.

"Where do you plan to land that bastard of yours anyway?" Robert asked as the pair began their ascent up the steep steps. "There can't be much land in the North still unclaimed for him to have, is there? Even the North isn't so big that every second son can have a city of his own."

"There is a town north of Darkport, on the River of the Rills, named Riverton," Eddard started. "The family that ruled it were large till the Great Spring Sickness reduced them down to a handful, and the last lost his heirs in Greyjoy's revolt before passing himself a year ago."

"It's a small town, no more than a few thousand, and it will make him a vassal to the Ryswells, but they are good and honest men and the smallfolk make their living mining lazuli to make blue dye," Eddard reasoned. "There are other places as well."

"If you give him that town, tell me," Robert answered. "I'll make sure to wear blue at the next feast. It'll make half the realm change clothes."

Eddard laughed. This was the Robert he remembered, the Robert from before the rebellion and before he had lost his betrothed, the invincible warrior who could make friends with any and all, hightborn or low, and who could turn enemy into ally with just a few minutes of conversation and a
few cups of wine. If he wanted to make the realm strong, to be remembered as a good king, then there was no doubt about it, as Robert certainly had the ability to do so. With the respect that the realm gave him for his strength and skill at arms and his famous charisma, there was little that he could not do to heal the bonds that held the realm together and mend the damage that years of mismanagement and abuse had done to the crown in the eyes of its vassals, and that made Eddard wonder.

If Robert was certainly so capable of doing it...then why hadn't he done it before now? He was at the age when a man began to start thinking about the legacy he would leave behind, that was true, but that raised the question of what had Robert been doing all those years before finding the motivation to truly make use his power, and what Eddard might find in King's Landing if he did indeed take up the office as the King's Hand.

Then they came upon the ironwood door that sealed the crypts tightly, and he put such thoughts aside to reflect upon later when he had the chance, instead turning his attentions to the present. As they opened the door and passed through, into a small and inconspicuous garden in the rear of the small cemetery that surrounds the First Keep, the burial place for the Stark's most favored of servants, the cold air struck their cheeks once more...and it felt warm, warm in comparison to the bitter cold of the earth below, and from there they saw that the courtyard had cleared out for the most part, the knights and ladies of Robert's retinue having gone to their chambers or to the city or to any other place in the castle, their things being swiftly brought out of the courtyard whilst the massive wheel house that was the queen's residence whilst travelling was moved towards the stables where its horses had been fed and watered. Ser Barristan Selmy, stood as still and as silent as any one of the statues of the crypt beneath his feet, made himself known with dutiful movements towards the king's side, taking his place alongside his charge once again, and Robert clapped Eddard on the shoulder once more.

"I best find that wife of mine before she starts thinking about coronations," the king laughed. "I tell you, if I went on a hunt that took a minute longer than I said it would she would say I died and slap a crown on Joffrey's head."

"Then I will see you at the feast, your grace," Eddard bowed.

"We have much to catch up on, and good wine and good food to do it over!" the king said warmly.

"I look forward to it," Eddard said, smiling at last.

And with that, the armored king departed towards the wing of the keep that proudly flew Baratheon banners in representation of it being given over towards the use of the crown...and stumbled into Robb's tutor, the silver haired and violet eyed Horrono Vaenyris, the Volantene in what was surely the formal dress of his homeland, a great tiger pelt of orange and black around his shoulders and wrapped across his chest like an immense cloak. Eddard sighed; the king had never once had an issue with those of Valyrian descent before the rebellion, and most certainly not with Valyrian women, that Eddard knew full well...but afterwards, he could not be sure if that trend had changed, not with the Targaryens and their immense pride in their amethyst eyes and silver locks...and if the king took offense...

"And who are you?" the king asked. "I hadn't expected to see a Valyrian so far north."

"I am Horrono Vaenyris, your grace," the Volantene answered deftly. "A Free Citizen of Volantis. Your deeds in vanquishing the Targaryens are legend there."
"Truly?" the king asked with some surprise. "I thought the Free Cities would have some fondness for the Targaryens, especially a Volantene."

"Not Volantis," Vaenyris answered. "Why would we, when Aegon the Conqueror slaughtered our armies and burnt our fleets? No, the greatest Targaryens are dead Targaryens."

The king roared with laughter then, and grinned before the two continued on their respective paths without further incident, leaving Eddard to believe that what had seen and heard was perhaps the best possible way for their meeting to have ended, before continuing on his own way, towards the Great Hall where he knew his lady wife was already at work making preparations for the feast to come, as was a woman's work. Winterfell was the seat of one of the most important families in Westeros, even if the rest of the realm did not realize the exact state of the North, which meant that it was to be expected that a feast be held whenever a visitor of importance arrived to stay within his halls...and of all the figures in Westeros, of all the people that could stay there, there were none of greater importance than that of the king and his kin. That meant his lady wife had the task of planning and preparing a feast that would have to be truly grand in scale, less people think that the Starks did not give their sovereign lord their full hospitality and began thinking of dark thoughts and questionable loyalties, but Winterfell was so great a castle and with so large a household and so many guests of high station that planning even a minor feast was a difficulty, though one Catelyn faced without complaint and with the knowledge that all of Winterfell's resources were at her disposal, though she had been rather quiet as of late, and he had little idea exactly what it was that she had planned...

...and when he stepped through the door into the Great Hall that should have been his own, it felt as if he had walked into a different castle. On the left and right walls were three massive banners of black stags and golden lions, huge things that would not shame the greatest of warships to have flown from their masts, and between the walls were eight rows of tables separated by an aisle long enough for four men to walk abreast without touching the guests sat on either side, and beneath the galleries that were already packed with quietly planning musicians were three huge barrels on their sides, great big pipes of oakwood that each held a hundred and twenty eight gallons of wine or ale that the servants were already hard at work preparing for the evening, tapping the wooden spigots in with hefty mallets, and just below the dais was another smaller barrel, a hogshead of sixty four gallons, placed on its side with a small glass window placed in the lid to reveal the dark malt within, beneath which was a set of hooks that held a bronze spigot shaped like a stag's head and the runed mallet with which to drive it in - in the old days of the Kings in the North and when the First Men dominated the realm, it had not been uncommon for the vassals of the realm to pay their taxes to their overlords in long lasting malt, in recognition of its great value to man and woman both; malt could last indefinitely in a cold cellar without losing its flavor, but it was also nourishing and could provide the energy one needed to survive the cold days and colder nights of wintertime, but weak enough that a mother could bring her babe from breast to cup without the risk of poisoning them, all of which had made it perfect for life in the North, and that perfection had made it valued, and that value had made it a tradition for an honored guest to be allowed to make the strike that would tap the barrel and to take the first cup.

Eddard knew that Robert would love that tradition in particular, even if he said he had gone off of wine, and as he walked forward he saw something else different from the norm - tiny wooden banners atop long poles rising from besides the plates of every seat, each carrying the sigil of the one that was meant to be seated there. Plates and bowls and cups of trifle pewter were already being placed alongside, and the latest Essosi trend of using miniature pitchforks with which to hold part of their meal in place so that the knife might cut and stab more easily had reached the city through White Harbor, and every plate had one alongside a good sharp blade and a spoon. But when he looked forward again, to the dais, he saw his lady wife and his two daughters making the final
preparations for the feast, Catelyn commanding the servants with a practiced voice, Sansa sat in her chair grimly doing what it was that she was told and Arya taking the initiative and instructing the servants in how to proceed without her mother's input and seemingly enjoying the act of doing so, a rare reversal of things if there ever was one. He ascended the steps, and his wife gave him the maximum amount of attention and warmth that was proper - as it was not seemly for a lord and his lady wife to show one another anything more than a mild fondness in front of others, even if they loved one another - and Arya smiled with excitement at the one part of being a lady that she seemed to enjoy and Sansa didn't even seem to acknowledge his presence in the slightest, or the presence of anything at all for that matter, not since Robert had made clear his hope to see their families joined...and as much as Eddard might have wanted to reassure her and tell her that she would not have to marry Joffrey instead of Domeric unless she so wanted to, he could not, not so quickly after the offer had been made anyhow, as it had to seem the result of careful deliberation for it to be proper to decline so generous an offer.

"How go the preparations, my lady wife?" Eddard asked, with all the dutiful courtesy that might be expected of a great lord. "King Robert expects a great feast."

"And it is a great feast that he shall have," Catelyn said with the hint of a smile. "The preparations go well, my lord husband. The cooks had some trouble for a time with their ovens, but they sorted the matter quick enough. There should be no more issues from now on, if the gods are kind."

"And I hope our daughters have learnt something?"

"I'm helping!" Arya said eagerly and with a surprising amount of pride. "I helped find mummers for the feast. They're going to do a show about Robert's Rebellion, and one of them has a huge costume with three dragon heads that breathes fire!"

"His grace will enjoy that," Eddard smiled, his wife looking towards their younger daughter with approval as he looked towards Sansa. "And what of my eldest daughter? What have you been doing, Sansa?"

"Please don't make me marry Joffrey," she said quietly without taking her eyes up from the ground.

"Sansa!" Catelyn said quickly, ready to say more before Eddard silenced her with a glance before sitting alongside his daughter upon the table's edge.

"I will talk with Robert about it when I get the chance," he said softly and quietly.

"But what if he tries to make me do it?" Sansa asked, looking towards him with fearful eyes. "What if -"

"It's alright," he said, stopping her before she could work herself into a nightmare. "He won't press the matter, not if I wish otherwise and not if you aren't willing. Robert would never force a woman to marry someone they would not want to, and there are other women for the prince to marry."

Robert's wish to see their family joined made sense, and more than the king himself might have realized; in the Seven Kingdoms, there were three great families in the Lannisters, the Tyrells and the Starks, and all three combined could defeat the rest of the realm...and as the Rebellion showed, a king could only be king if he had the guaranteed support of two of them. Through his marriage to Cersei Lannister and the blood that flowed through his children's veins Robert had access to unending wealth and a powerful ally in the Lord of Casterly Rock, but the change of dynasties that the war had brought with its conclusion had broken the peace of the realm and meant that the
transition from Targaryen to Baratheon would need extra support in order to avoid the remaining loyalists rising in revolt, if perhaps for only a few generations till people became accustomed to having a stag as their king instead of a dragon. But that meant for his son's reign to be truly secure from threats within and without, he would need another ally, and with the Tyrells well remembered for their acts of besieging Storm's End and in driving Robert from the field at Ashford, it was clear why he might pass over the Reach in favor of the North, especially with the close bond that the two men had forged with their time together at the Eyrie and on the battlefield...but with the power of the Hand of the King at his disposal, Eddard could easily try to arrange a match between Joffrey and the Tyrell maiden, Margaery, in order to ensure that his friend gets the alliance he needs without having to surrender his daughter to someone she does not love, and that was all the more reason to consider the king's offer more seriously - to protect his family and make sure that they had the chance to live the lives they wanted to live, Eddard would do anything, and a mere five years in the south was a little price to pay if it meant that Jon might be able to found a strong dynasty and Sansa marry the one she loves.

Sansa looked at him more hopefully, and he gave her a small smile before rising to his feet once more and looking towards his lady wife, their eldest daughter more at ease than before.

"Will your uncle be sat with us upon the dais?" he asked, curious.

"I would hope so," Catelyn answered, her voice carrying the hint of weariness. "I had sent a raven to invite him here so that we might talk, but he seems more interested in talking with Robb and Brandon than me. He has his reasons."

"I am sure he will be happy to speak with you again during the feast," Eddard answered with his lordly voice. "Robert and I will spend most of the feast discussing a matter."

"Oh? What matter?"

Eddard raised his left hand to his right shoulder, as if adjusting the clasp of his cloak to be more loose in the indoor warmth of Winterfell's great hall. He saw the realization in her eyes instantly, a mix of surprise and unease.

"It is a small matter," Eddard said, before changing the topic in case one was listening in and thought to tell the king or Tywin Lannister that he did not know whether or not to accept the office. "What other entertainment shall we have for the evening?"

"Tumblers and aerialists were easy enough to find," Catelyn answered, glancing towards the aisle that split the hall down the middle, disapproving. "They say there is enough space to perform, but should something go wrong they will land on someone. But the musicians know all the kings favorite songs."

"Fifty-Four Tuns and a Cask of Ale?"

"Indeed, and the Rains of Castamere too," she added. "Lord Lannister should like it."

Eddard nodded...and silently hoped that it might get him to explain a question that had been on Eddard's mind ever seen the raven had come the month before.

Why would Tywin Lannister come north so quickly after Jon Arryn died, and without sending a message at that, unless the Lord of Casterly Rock himself was afraid of something?
And if Tywin Lannister was concerned of something, it had to be something of dire importance.

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End of Part 17!

Chapter End Notes

Well, this was a fun one to write, though I am tired out from wrapping it up so there won't be much of a summary! :p

But in short, and in a very summarized nature, in this part we see Robert offering the Handship for many of the same reasons as in canon; with Jon Arryn dead and the Lannisters filling the royal court to the brim, he wants a close and trusted friend there alongside him in the south to help him run the realm. But Eddard was less receptive, and so Robert has come up with a deal - serve as his hand for five years of summer time and choose whether to stay on in the role or leave at the end of it, buying time for the king to have a chance to forge a legacy worth having, a rather different goal for him than giving him the title so that King Bob could go down to the brothel and wine cellar everyday!

Oh, and before anyone says anything, Big Bobby Baratheon hasn't entirely given up on whoring and drinking, since that's about as likely as Aerion Brightflame drinking wildfire and actually turning into a dragon, or the Iron Throne suddenly declaring itself king of the realm :p

Anyway, from that point on, this PoV primarily set the stage for a future PoV - that of Catelyn in the next part, from whom we shall see the lords and wards of Winterfell feast in King Robert's name and all the entertaining fun that will be, followed by a Robb PoV which, I assure you, will be a fun part indeed and then a !mystery! part, because who doesn't love surprises? :D
A few hours later...

The great hall of Winterfell was quiet but for the sound of torches and braziers and hearths all crackling, and Catelyn stood in the perfect silence next to her husband in her finest clothes, a long dress of the soft reds and blues that were the colors of her family, and besides her were all the highborn women of Winterfell in a long line that stretched from the place beneath the dais where the sixty four gallon hogshead of ale and all its decoration was kept to the open door, and opposite her was Robb and then Brandon and then Rickon and then all the other men of Winterfell and even the bastard who had the place at the far end, all of them but for her husband, all in a row that mirrored her own. Only Eddard Stark himself was separate from this row, stood before the barrel in his own finery, as was the ancient tradition of the First Men when one's liege lord came to feast in the hall of his vassal, something that she had witness many times before from the other perspective whenever her husband and her family were invited to a feast with one of their vassals, with it being her husband's vassals and family who were lined through the hall and her husband leading their family inside.

But here it was again, with the roles reversed, with the Lord of Winterfell waiting as the King of the Seven Kingdoms walked towards him, in clothes of perfect black and brilliant gold, followed by his wife Cersei and then their three golden haired children, with Joffrey first as the heir to the realm and then Tommen and Myrcella, each with a line of their own, from the most powerful and prestigious men at the front to the lowliest retainer in the rear. From the balconies above, it would have looked almost like a sword entering a sheath, with the king as the very tip of the blade, but her familiarity with the proceeding and the king's warm and friendly nature, shown even in the silence in the form of a curious but eager smile, made it feel like nothing of the sort, and she was grateful that her husband had seen fit to make sure that the King knew well how he was meant to enter the hall before hand, so that he would not embarrass himself and his families by not knowing how the Northmen did things when welcoming a guest to their hall on the first day of their stay, just as how he had told him to expect gifts on the day of their departure, another tradition that had, in old times, served as a show that the host wanted his guest to return to his own home in a safe and expedient manner, something that was ever a concern in the cold blizzards of the North or in the then untamed forests of the south where all manner of long forgotten beasts had once lurked and feasted on the bones of men...but now, it was just something for one to remember their visit with and little more.

"Your grace," her husband started, dropping to one knee before the king. "The honor is yours."

Then with open hands he raised the mallet, its wooden surface covered in deeply carved runes made red with the sap of a wierwood tree. The king took it with one hand, and Eddard took the bronze spigot and moved it into over the small ring of softer wood, holding it carefully so that his hands would not be hit when Robert made the first strike.

"Watch your hands," Robert said with a smile, placing the mallet's flat side directly against the antlered head of the spigot. "I'm going to put it through with one hit."

"Your grace," Eddard said quietly. "If you strike too hard, it might crack -"
"If there's anything I'm good with, Ned, it's a hammer, and a mallet's just another kind of hammer," Robert smiled, bringing the hammer back for strength...

...and before her husband could say another word there was the bang of the strike and of spigot piercing barrel. A finely dressed servant appeared, giving the king a silver cup covered in prancing stags and running wolves, a piece of well made metalwork from White Harbor that had been in Winterfell's cupboards for as long as she could remember, being there even on the first day that she had arrived at Winterfell with a newborn Robb in her arms, not that she had ever had a good answer for it existing in the first place; even her husband knew little about its history other than that his lord father had ordered a crate's worth years before, along with plates and serving trays and everything else that might be needed on the feast table.

The king's eyes went wide at the sight, and he grinned widely before placing it beneath the bronze stag's mouth and pushing on the antlers to bring a dark and frothy ale flowing forth. Then he raised it, taking a small sip.

And he smiled.

"You Northmen make damned good ale, Ned," the king laughed...

...and then, instantly, the music began to play, Robert clapping Eddard on the shoulder for the second time since their arrival as the two of them climbed up the steps onto the dais, smiling and talking between themselves the way close brothers might with every step, Catelyn and Cersei following behind and then their children behind them and then those few who were given the privilege of sitting in a position of honor upon the dais, a short list, but one that included men as important as Lord Tywin Lannister and Theon Greyjoy, the heir to the Iron Islands and one whom the king was curious about...and more importantly than any other, to her, was her uncle. But before she could seek him out, before she could even sit at her table, she saw Tywin Lannister give his daughter Cersei a silent glance, and moments after the Lannister woman turned towards Catelyn with a smile, though the Tully woman was clever enough to know that it was only diplomatic, and only because it was expected for two ladies of such high station to interact with one another.

"It seems our husbands have much to catch up on, Lady Stark," Cersei said, with all the softness that would be expected of a queen. "It has been a long time since they have last met, hasn't it?"

"Indeed it has, your grace," Catelyn said, returning the courtesies. "They have not seen one another since the end of the Greyjoy Rebellion. They will have much to talk about."

"As will you and I," Cersei said, smiling as the two came to their seats and sat, the queen besides her husband and Catelyn besides an empty seat intended for her uncle, and though Robert and Eddard were happily talking with one another out of friendship, catching up on the better part of a decade of separation - so much so that Catelyn wondered if her beloved husband had forgotten what it was that Robert had offered him and what he hoped for of Sansa and his own son - whilst Catelyn and Cersei did the same simply because it was expected of them to do so, if they were not already talking to someone else. "We have neither seen nor spoken since the royal wedding at King’s Landing. How have you been?"

"Well, your grace, and you?" Catelyn returned, with as much diplomacy and as little joy as her queen.

"Well," Cersei answered as if the two were friends. "It hasn't been too cold for you here, so far from Riverrun?"
In truth, the two knew little about one another - Catelyn herself had been preoccupied with the young Robb at the time and Cersei herself had been with her brother and making preparations for the wedding whenever she was available, meaning the two had said few words to one another the entire day, and at Harrenhal before then both had been expected to ignore the other's presence in the lady's game to see whose beauty received the most favor from the crowds and lords assembled...a game which Rhaegar seemingly won, seeing how much attention he received from man and woman alike there, not that he had ever enjoyed any of it.

"At first it had been so cold at night that I could never get warm, no matter how many blankets I put on," Catelyn answered honestly, making an attempt to break through the awkward disconnect between her and her queen. "I became used to it after a while, though, and Winterfell is warmer in winter than Riverrun ever is."

"How come?"

"There are pipes in the walls, your grace," Catelyn said as the first plates were put before the two ladies, both with three thick cuts of ham that had been drizzled in honey and served with grapes of a deep green and a good bun of soft bread, garnished with a single slice of lemon, a rare thing in the north. "They carry hot water from the springs beneath Winterfell to every part of the castle and there is a place where the servants could start a fire to help heat it, no matter how cold it might be in winter."

"A clever design," came the voice of Tywin Lannister from further down the table, sat besides her husband, his tone carrying the hint of curiosity with it. "What material are the pipes made from? Lead?"

"Copper, my lord," she answered. "The smithies have had little use of it since the Andals crossed the Narrow Sea and brought iron and steel with them, but the North still has many mines full of it and little to do with it. But since it is easy to work with and the metal so common, every part of Winterfell has it. Even some of the smallfolk can afford to do it for their own homes, but they need to burn wood to heat the water and most simply use hay bales instead."

"Hay?" Cersei asked. "What good is hay in keeping one warm?"

"The Northmen have found out that thick bales of it inside the walls help to trap the heat inside," Catelyn explained. "I suppose it keeps it from escaping through the gaps between the stonework."

"I suppose that must be why your houses are all so large," the Queen answered.

"More because of how most families bring their kin from outside the city into their homes when winter comes. It lets them put their coin together to buy enough food, drink and firewood to make sure that they can all live through the cold when the snow comes."

"Pardon my lateness, my lords and ladies," said a voice that she looked towards to see...

...someone she barely recognized after so many years away from Riverrun and away from the rest of her family: her uncle Brynden's thick red hair had long since turned to grey but for a few rare strands that were like the color of rust on iron, and his face had aged too, wrinkles on his brow that had never been there when she had left Riverrun and gone north with her husband at the end of the rebellion and after King Robert's coronation and wedding. But he had the same smile and the same eyes, the same movements, and finally he took his seat besides his niece.
"It seems people know of my part in the War of the Ninepenny Kings even here."

"Uncle Brynden," Catelyn said with a smile, the queen content to let her talk to someone else for a change and allowing her to do so without the haughty barrier of courtesies that were never needed around family. "I was beginning to wonder if you would ever come to the feast."

"I was wondering if I would ever make it to the feast," her uncle laughed. "Say what you will about Riverrun being small, but I would be damned if one couldn't find their way around it when they came to visit. A man could starve to death in this keep of your husband's before he ever found his way out."

"It gets easier the longer you are here," she said as Brynden started cutting through his meat. "It is good to see you again, uncle."

"And good to see you again, niece," Brynden said warmly. "It's been too long, Cat. Lysa sends her regards, though nowadays I'm not sure whether that is a good thing or a bad thing."

"What do you mean?" Catelyn asked in confusion, narrowing her brow. "Is something wrong with her?"

"Your sister was always..." Brynden started quietly before trailing off, searching for the word. ".emotional. You remember how she was, all shy and moody. The marriage to Jon Arryn didn't help much, but its best not to talk about that here at the table."

"But your message found me at the Eyrie, and I came as quickly as I could," her uncle said, meeting her with his bright eyes. "If you sent a message to me, it had to be important."

"And it is," Catelyn admitted, quieting her voice as the musicians ended their first song and went onto the next - Fifty-Four Tuns, the king's favorite song from what her husband had told her. "But it is also something not to be talked about here."

"...is it that bad?" Her uncle asked grimly.

"More of a personal matter than anything bad," she said, the relief appearing on Brynden's face almost instantly. "But it is important....it is to do with my children."

And at that, Brynden laughed, nearly choking on a piece of ham before putting his hand on his brow and looking down at his plate.

"Gods! Cat, I thought you were hiding a meaning behind those words of yours on that letter," the amused Blackfish answered, reaching for a cup of wine to wash down his meat. "If I had known that what you had written was what you actually meant, I might have taken my chance to enjoy the journey!"

"But uncle," she objected quietly and under a cloak of grace. "None of them want to be the way they should be...Robb would rather have all the women of Winterfell in his bed than be married -"

"And Robb is barely five and ten," Brynden answered. "If a boy doesn't want half the world in his bed by that age then there's something wrong with him. Look at him down there, Cat," Brynden added with a point of his knife down the hall, to where Robb was sat with his half-brother, using the presence of Lord Tywin Lannister and the need for him to be on the dais as an excuse to be with Jon
and the rest of his wolves, coincidentally perched with Wylla on his left and Alys Karstark on his right.

"The boy's expected to make one of the most important choice's in his life when he barely knows what that choice means, so there's no wonder why he wants to look around and see what he can find before he does," Brynden said with a shrug, reaching for the lemon slice and squeezing the juice out onto the meat, humming to the tune of the music.

"But he does know," Catelyn said. "He knows what a marriage means for him and his family, what an alliance will bring, what having children will mean."

"But does he know what it means for him?" Brynden countered instantly. "Have you spoken to him about what that means?"

"About...what?"

"About how if he chooses wrongly and ends up wedded to a woman he thought he loves but doesn't, he'll still be expected to make children with her," Brynden started. "You can't push him along on this one, Cat, or do much more than guide him. He'll know when he's found someone he wants."

"And what if he doesn't?" Catelyn asked. "What if he never finds someone he loves?"

"Then let him find someone that he can at least be friends with," Brynden reasoned. "Most marriages in the realm are like that."

She looked at him, then, with the sad eyes of a mother concerned for the well being of her children and the futures that she hoped and dreamed to see them have - Robb as the proud heir of Winterfell with sons and daughters of his own and a wife who loved him and supported him when he needed supporting and gave him advice when he needed advice, Sansa a happy mother married to a man who would treat her well and give her the world if she so much as asked for it, clever and able to manage a household no matter what challenges came to her...Brandon a valiant and heroic knight with songs written in his honor and telling generations as yet unborn of his valor and courage...and Arya, and Rickon...

"Aye, don't you make that face at me," Brynden sighed. "Seven hells, Cat. What is it that you want me to do?"

"Will you at least speak with them?" she asked. "If only to tell me where I am going wrong?"

"Fine, fine," Brynden nodded. "But only if you promise to never make that face again whilst I am here. Promise?"

Catelyn laughed, then, as she always had whenever her uncle was around when she was still a little girl at Riverrun. "I promise."

"Your grace!" Brynden said, turning to the king. "Will you be telling the boys war stories after the feast is done?"

"I've got plenty of them if they want to hear them," the king answered. "Why? You want to tell them about the Ninepenny Kings?"

"I just want to make sure you don't forget to tell them how we saved you at the Stoney Sept,"
Brynden answered.

"You?" the king roared with laughter. "You'll find that was Ned and his Northmen clearing those streets. Connington must have pissed himself when he saw those pikes pouring through the street."

"We all did our part for victory," her husband answered, never one to accept the glories that others placed upon him. "I wouldn't have been able to enter the town so quick if your men hadn't been keeping them off balance."

"Not like it would've mattered much with how many men you brought to that battle."

"I think you're forgetting who it was that pushed the royalists back to the Trident whilst you two formed up your armies again," Brynden said, smiling as he raised his cup. "Here's to the Targaryens. May they burn in hell."

The king laughed then and the three men, all of them commanders of the rebel armies from the war, clanked their cups together, and when they slumped back into their chairs again, Brynden turned to her with another warm smile.

"It'll take time, but I'll speak with your sons later in the week," he said, sipping his wine. "I need a chance to learn more about them first, since I know little about them other than what they look like and what they are named. Tonight will give me a chance."

"Thank you, uncle."

"Aye, well, I came all this way," Brynden answered. "I might as well stay awhile."

Instantly Catelyn knew something was truly wrong, something more than what her uncle wanted her to know. Her father had often been travelling around the Riverlands when she and her siblings were young, forever meeting with one lord or another to keep peace in the Riverlands and to maintain the fragile balance of power that existed between their line and their bannermen, a necessary thing since the Riverlands were not like the North or the Westerlands in how the greatest family in the region could defeat the next two or have a great number of reliable allies with which to support their arms...and that meant that her uncle Brynden had always been the one left with the charge of looking after the three of them, the one they went to with their childhood woes and their questions about the world and their need for advice and guidance, and even the young Petyr Baelish had done so, being treated no different from Edmure even if he was but only a landed knight from the Fingers, the smallest and poorest part of the Vale. He resolved arguments fairly and justly, made equal preparations for them all, and that only changed as they had aged - Catelyn had grown into a young woman who did not need her uncle's advice as much as she once had, and so she did not receive it, whilst Edmure had found friends close to his age who knew him well and Petyr...Petyr was simply so clever that he didn't need anyone's advice.

Then there was Lysa.

Lysa was a girl who the outbreak of war had forced to become a woman before she was truly ready, a lover for songs and stories about heroic knights and perfect charming princes and gentle hearted women and the idea that love, true love, could conquer any obstacle. Catelyn had known even then that those were merely tales of how the world should have been rather than how it was, but her sister had not. Her dream had become a nightmare that was all too real, and for that her uncle, having fallen out with their father at the war's end over plans of marriage, had gone with her to the Vale, to help the only one of them who still needed helping, even going with her to King's Landing when Jon...
Arryn had first become Hand of the King after the chaos that was the fall of the Targaryen dragonkings had come to a close.

For Brynden to be so ready to leave her was either a sign that she had finally conquered her problems...or that they had conquered her, that the shy maiden who wanted nothing more than a dashing hero that Catelyn remembered as her little sister was no more, and that even her beloved uncle Brynden had given up.

It was that thought and not thirst that made her reach for her wine cup, that thought alone and nothing else.

"Cat," her uncle said quietly, his voice a mere murmur over the loud beats and rhythms that echoed off the rafters from the musician's gallery. "You haven't once touched your food since I've sat down."

"I need to know what has happened to my sister, uncle," she said as quietly as she could.

Her uncle sighed, then.

"She isn't your sister or my niece anymore, Cat. I don't know who she is."

With that she could only stare in quiet disbelief, a stare that was only broken as the music reached its crescendo and came to a halt, the twang of lutes and the pounding of drums and the flaring of flutes all coming to a stop and being replaced by the sound of applause from grateful lords and ladies all well on the way to being drunk. She looked to her ham, then, feeling cold instead of heat, and she took the plate and passed it to a serving girl as they passed by with a tray of finished places and were themselves followed by another girl with a tray covered in new, hot meals, her ham replaced with a thick fillet of Northern salmon, a long and thick bodied fish found in most of the cold water rivers of the North, eating trout and frogs and everything else that got close, but also a fish that had to be quickly brought to Winterfell from the White Knife in boxes packed with ice to keep it from rotting in the warmth, making it a rare thing on the table, even for the Starks of Winterfell, and all the greater a sign that the king was a guest of the highest importance. With the new food came a new song, cheerful and happy but slower and less powerful than Robert's favorites, and a new atmosphere.

"Come on, Ned," Robert said happily as he rose to his feet. "My cup's empty, and so is yours, and if we don't fill them now we won't have a chance before its all gone."

"I thought you were drinking less, Robert?" Eddard asked as he rose, the Lord of Casterly Rock rising with him, for the simple fact that it would be seen strangely for one to not drink when their king did.

"And I am," the king laughed. "I've only had one cup so far instead of three. Besides, it's a feast...and feasts are for drinking!"

And with that, the king started his way down the steps with cup in hand, going towards the barrel of Arbor gold.

"Are you alright, my lady?" her husband asked quietly as Tywin Lannister followed the king, doing what he did...which, in this case, was filling his cup to halfway with Arbor gold before adding Arbor red, making some mixture of the two that his grace clearly approved of from the first sip.

"I am," she answered, turning to face her husband and seeing a small, cheering smile, and when he
went to do the same that Robert did, it was as though her worries for her sister went with him, and she began to eat with the tiny metal pitchfork that was so enormously helpful at the dining table.

And rather than look to the queen to her side or to the uncle who brought only grim news, she looked to the rest of the feast hall, to her children, curious as to how they were doing with so grand a feast. Her Robb was trapped between the two young women, either of whom could be his bride and the future Lady of Winterfell if he wished it, and was handling it the way that only the heir to Winterfell could - by having their siblings keep their sister's attentions and to keep them busy whilst he eagerly listened to the tales and stories of the Volantene tiger sat opposite him, his words out of hearing but surely a captivating tale indeed for Robb to be so utterly entranced by it, and there was no doubt to her that it was yet another tale of Valyrian glory, and not far from them was her husband's bastard, and though he was no son of hers, she could not help but notice that the Lannister's own bastard girl had been seated next to him, the two quietly talking with one another as the rest of the feast went on around them,

On the other side of the dais, past where her husband and the king sat upon their return, was her second son, Brandon, who had been placed between the young and beautiful daughter of the king, Princess Myrcella, who looked like her mother writ small, and on the other side was none other than Ser Barristan Selmy, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard and the one member of the king's escort to be sat upon the dais, the rest positioned around the hall so as to guarantee that no assassin, no matter how sudden his attack, would be able to strike a killing blow on the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and though it had been hoped that it would be Myrcella who might catch Bran's attention so that he might learn more about life in the south, he was more interested in the veteran knight to his side, his greatest hero and his dream of being a member of the Kingsguard made manifest, whilst the princess herself was more curious about the meals that were being placed before her and the stone carvings that decorated the room's columns, telling the history of the Stark line in a more permanent manner than any tapestry...and past those two were Joffrey and Sansa - the royal prince was trying to charm her, that much was ever clear, and Sansa instead had a grim look that would not be out of place on her father, simply nodding and accepting his compliments and flattery and paying no more attention than what was proper and polite whilst looking down the hall towards her own love, Domeric. Her septa would be proud if she saw her, but it should have been obvious even to Joffrey that Sansa had not even the slightest interest in him, yet the prince went on, trying to charm her with his sweet words and gentle smiles and tender gestures and failing utterly with every attempt.

Lastly, on her side of the dais were Arya and Tommen, her daughter looking down to the rest of the feast hall, at Dacey dressed in her long and ladylike dress of green and black and with her hair done long, as she always did during a feast time and for other such formal occasions when there was such an important guest around, and Arya did so with as much uncertainty and doubt as there was want to be the same, and that feeling meant that the princeling was left to his own devices so as to eat and drink whatever he might possibly want and without his mother or father to tell him otherwise, though between spoonfuls of sweet things he seemed scared of something for some reason, not that Catelyn could see why, and it was not like Arya to scare little boys...but...

"Uncle, what do you think of Arya?" Catelyn asked with clear concern.

"Your youngest daughter?" Brynden asked, looking down the table to the one child that looked more like their father than her before turning back to his niece. "She seems nice enough. She helped you with the feast, didn't she? With the seating?"

"She normally doesn't like ladylike things like singing and sewing," Catelyn said honestly. "But she likes running a household or helping plan feasts and other things like that."
"Aye, does she now?"

Then he turned to his great niece and what Catelyn saw was like magic.

"Your mother tells me you did great helping her with the feast," Brynden said with a soft, approving smile. "You should be proud of yourself."

And just so, Arya smiled and seemed even happier than she was already.

"You know, it is a lady's work to manage the household so that her husband might focus on greater things," Brynden said, hinting without saying. "They tell the servants what to buy and what not to and what to cook for dinner and where to build, and none can ever tell them otherwise. The lands might be her husband's, but the castle is hers...and for a queen..."

"What?" Arya asked, a hint of surprise and curiosity in her voice. "And what?"

"What the queen says, the realm does," Brynden explained as though it were nothing. "It might be the king who tells his vassals when to raise their banners and when to lower them again, but the queen can tell the realm to feast or not to, to hold tourneys or not to, to give to charity or not to."

"Every woman in the realm looks to her as an example," Brynden said before turning to Cersei. "Isn't that so, your grace? How many women are there who wish they were half as beautiful as you?"

"Of course it is," Cersei answered with a queen's pride, Arya looking towards her with...admiration? "Every woman in the court wishes they were as beautiful as me. They style their hair like mine, and buy dyes to brighten it and wear the same clothes."

"See?" Brynden said, looking towards Arya. "When the queen speaks, the realm listens, especially when it is a woman like Visenya who does the speaking."

"Visenya?" Arya asked. "Aegon's queen...? The one with Dark Sister?"

"Aye, that one," Brynden said between bites. "She was as beautiful as she was strong, or so the singer's say. She was the strongest queen that the realm has ever had, even fighting off a dozen assassins to protect her husband before founding the Kingsguard to protect her family."

And with that, Arya went quiet and went back to her meal...but it was obvious even to Catelyn that she was thinking.

"You can't just tell a girl that she will have to grow up to be a lady," Brynden said. "You have to give them a reason to want to be a lady. They'll do the rest themselves."

"But...what if it doesn't work? What if it makes them grow even wilder than they were before?"

"It works on boys," Brynden said with another sip of wine before setting his cup down on the table. "And it worked on you."

With that, Catelyn went into thought, and not the music, not the change of plates, not the words of her husband and not even the entertaining show that was three men dressed as the Targaryen dragon getting their heads whacked off by another dressed like a stag with a giant hammer could bring her back out of it...and she realized that if Arya could not be made into a lady, then perhaps, perhaps,
she could be made into a queen.

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End of Part 18!

Chapter End Notes

Fun! :D

I'll admit that this part changed quite a bit from what I initially planned, since the original plan for the part would have meant starting half way through the feast rather than during it, but that didn't work quite right so we went back to the start of it which threw a lot of my other plans off and forced me to sew things together again and...well, I think things came out rather good anyway, since once the part began to flow from there, it just wouldn't stop :) But I will also say that some of the themes that I had wanted to cover in this part will likely be covered in the next instead, something which will likely result in a chunkier part 19, but there's nothing wrong with that - part 19 was going to be a pretty big one anyway :D

And onto the summary of this part...well, where to start! It's a bit late, so there won't be a big summary fro this one, but to start from the top: we see the little Northern tradition of allowing one's honored guest to tap the barrel, as was mentioned in the previous part, and King Robert, ever a lover of booze and hammering things, most certainly enjoyed that part of his stay in Winterfell, and from there...things got rolling indeed, with Catelyn and Cersei making some diplomatic smalltalk, Tywin Lannister making notes of what it is that allows Winterfell to remain habitable even in the coldest, darkest winters.

And then Brynden Tully arrived! If you remember one of the earlier Catelyn parts, you'll remember just how stumped Catelyn was with her children and how things weren't exactly going to plan - Sansa was fine, if frustrating, but Arya's ferocity was something that she had little idea on how to tame and her sons were little better - and how she sent a raven to the Eyrie and so Brynden came to Riverrun to lend a helping hand...and though he might not have any children of his own, Brynden is very, very good at this sort of thing, what with practically raising the Tully siblings all by himself. His style of parenting is rather different than Catelyn's or even Tywin's, in that he doesn't push them along to the end goal and make them conform to the role that society expects them to have, he makes them want to go along to the end goal themselves and is entirely ready to accept a few kinks here and there in the end result, and Arya is his first crack at it with the Stark children. If you remember some of her earliest parts in A Game of Thrones, you'll remember that she was actually rather saddened by the fact that she couldn't do the things that Sansa could do, like how she was regularly scolded for her needlework by Septa Mordane simply because she could never live up the standards that her "perfect" sister set, and was mocked by Sansa's friends to the point that she started to take the things that they said into herself, starting to see herself as ugly and flawed, and so on.

Now, that sort of thing hasn't happened to her in this timeline, that's already rather clear
what with Dacey acting like a role model to her and keeping her well away from that sort of negative influence, being more like a big sister to her than not...but like in canon, Dacey is the sort of woman who doesn't mind doing what society expects of her when it is expected; she still wears dresses at feasts, even if she doesn't do sewing at other times or anything of that sort and would rather go hunting in the woods or knock someone's block off in bare knuckle boxing than sing or do any of the traditionally ladylike things, and hence Arya's confusion and hesitation in the part; she deeply admires Dacey, as evident from all of her earlier parts, but she doesn't understand how she can be both, how Dacey can still be the strong woman she loves at one time and then wear dresses and dance at another. She doesn't realize that Dacey is not the extreme, but the middleground between women like, say, Asha Greyjoy and her own sister.

And what Brynden says goes a great deal in mending that divide - he's saying that a woman doesn't need to commit to one side or the other, but can balance both the same way a knight can be the deadliest thing on the battlefield and yet a gentle and kind soul when at home and in times of peace, and we know that there are definitely women in ASOIAF who fit that role - Visenya Targaryen, as mentioned in the part above, is the perfect example; she cut down a number of people who were there to see her and Aegon dead, yet not long after she took personal charge in helping her nephew Aenys recover...and maybe murdered him the process, but that's besides the point :p

And with that, Catelyn starts getting a rather interesting idea of copying the same method... :)


Robb III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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After the feast...

Robb slumped back into his seat as the servants began clearing away the plates and cups of the many men and women who already retired for the evening, those of the royal retinue who had spent a long time travelling on the roads and were looking forward to a long night in a warm and soft bed and those who had spent much of the day exploring the city and seeing what the heart of Northern civilization, the place where the culture of the First Men was at its strongest, had to offer, and with them had went their guides and other Northmen who were simply tired out by the day of greeting and feasting. Almost all the ladies that were his sister's friends were gone from the hall, with many but not all of their brothers having gone with them at their insistence, but despite that most of his Wolves were still there alongside him, occasionally picking at the platters of sweet Southron fruits that were a rarity in the North and slowly drinking the warm and spiced cider that was the traditional after-meal drink of the First Men, something to warm one's belly for when they crawled beneath the blankets. A small part of Robb was tempted to do the same, to call it now and go back to his own bed so as to be able to rise early tomorrow, but there was one thing that his Volantene tutor had suggested to be done first, one opportunity that had been given earlier in the day and that he refused for miss for anything and one that he had bargained with his father for the chance to have.

"So you lot are the ones that stayed to listen to me talk about the war, eh?" Robert laughed as he walked through the emptying hall and pulled out a chair by their table, Ser Barristan Selmy following his lord and Robb's younger brother Brandon following the two and himself followed by a curious Arya, with Brynden the Blackfish not far behind. "You've probably all heard Ned talk about the war now and then, but he wasn't with me for half of it."

Robb smiled at the sight of the king - who could ever turn down a chance to speak with the Demon of the Trident himself, the living legend that had smashed the royalists in every battle and done the same to the dragon prince when he came out of hiding? He was like a hero of song and myth made into flesh and blood and his deeds in the name of the woman he loved, a Stark woman, had done much to mend the wounds that the Targaryens had made in the long bond between North and South with their monstrous deeds.

"My father doesn't like talking about the war," he said truthfully and to the king's obvious surprise. "He says there was little glory in it."

"Your father was always too damned humble for his own good," Robert laughed again as he fell into his seat. "He's been that way since we met at the Eyrie. How about you? Do you think there was glory in what we did?"

"You defeated three armies in a single day," Robb said as the others looked towards their king with interest and awe and respect, even Horrono Vaenyr. "No one had ever done it before."

"Aye! The Battle of Summerhall," the king grinned, leaning onto the table and rolling up his sleeves, the golden cloth bulging from the tightness of the thick muscles behind. "Gods! What a battle it was. Did those tutors of yours tell you that we only had three men for every four of theirs, and only a few more horses to make up the difference?"
"How did you win when the enemy had a quarter more men?" Torrhen Karstark asked with amazement, his brother sat besides, half-asleep in his seat and still awake by willpower alone. "They should have overwhelmed you."

The king smiled as Dacey found herself a seat alongside the others, Arya looking towards her only to get an approving nod from the Mormont woman.

"They would have, but their armies were separated from one another by the terrain," Robert said, starting to explain, taking three left over knives from around the table and scrunching up the cloth to make the hills and land and arranging the knives just so that their sharpest points indicated the way they were marching. "Summerhall didn't have walls since the Targaryens thought they wouldn't need any, but they built it on a hill just in case. Said it was to get a good view of the beautiful Stormlands and so it could be seen from a distance, but it wasn't fifty years before that they had made war on Dorne and knew what good a hill could do to protecting a castle."

"But what good is a hill for a castle without walls?" the Smalljon asked. "Even the wildlings build walls around their camps."

"See, Summerhall was in the Dornish Marches," the king explained. "The mountains meant that they would have protection to the south and rough terrain all around to slow down an advance, and the castle itself was out of the way. It wouldn't be important enough to attack first, not whilst Blackhaven still stood to the south and Stonehelm to the east. The castle's only value is the position it has, and nothing more, not even the symbolism. Dragonstone has that."

"That's why the Blackfyres never went for it," Vaenyris said, taking a small drink of the hot cider before setting his cup down on the table to let it cool a little more. "It would only be useful if they already had a way into the Stormlands and needed a place to put their armies together."

"Exactly," Robert said. "Summerhall is close to the middle of the Stormlands. It's the perfect rally point, and the royalists knew it. I had just made my way back to the Stormlands from Gulltown and was assembling my own forces when I found out that the Cafferens, the Fells and the Grandisons were more loyal to Aerys than to me, and that they had been gathering their swords, planning to put their armies together so as to hold me in the Stormlands long enough for their reinforcements to arrive, but they hadn't had a chance to do so."

"I was still gathering my forces, but I knew I had to stop them before they had a chance to combine arms," the king continued as a serving woman came over and put a slowly steaming cup in front of him. "So I marched west."

"Isn't Felwood on the way to Summerhall?" Robb asked. "How did you get past them?"

"I took a path through the Kingswood," the man for whom Robb was named answered, swilling his cup around to stir the spices within. "Lord Fell had last fought in the War of the Ninepenny Kings, and not very well."

"He had lost one of his sons on what was meant to be a simple scouting mission on Bloodstone, trying to find out where the Golden Company and its allies were camped and if there was any good terrain between the two armies for a battle," Brynden added. "Maelys' lot had found a deserter a three days who told them about the mission and wiped out the whole party in an ambush, using trap doors buried in the ground and covered with sand."
"Very clever," Vaenyris approved, Robb agreeing in silence.

"Aye, it was, and that had ruined the man," Robert sighed before continuing on. "Made him cautious of losing more men in the same way, so he hardly ever sent out outriders, yet alone outriders in his own lands. That's how we managed to make our way past without him noticing. Once we were through his lands, it was an easy march on the castle, but the spring rains came quick and washed out the roads...and though they slowed us down, they made the royalists wait a few days for the ground to harden again, lest their horses get bogged down in the mud."

"And that let us reach Summerhall first," Robert said with a growing smile. "The castle was a burnt out ruin, half of it was collapsed, and it hadn't any men to guard it. It was little better than Oldstones."

"If there were enough bits of stonework around to say that it was a castle, then it is far better off than Oldstones," Brynden said quietly.

"But I put my men to work," Robert said. "We sealed up some of the more damaged parts of the castle with stone and moved the debris around the courtyard to make it seem like a tower had fallen, blocking off the eastern view of the main courtyard. Then we went inside, and brought our horses behind the wall. From a distance, the castle looked even worse off than it was when we arrived, and it looked empty."

Robb leaned forward, then, smiling as he realized what was about to be said.

"The Fawnton's came first, trumpeting their horns to try and signal to their allies that they had arrived, only to hear silence, and so they started setting camp to rest after their long march through the horrid weather," Robert said, his voice lowering. "They drank, they feasted, and they went to sleep dreaming of victory, and when the sun rose tomorrow..."

He trailed off to silence...

...and then Robert slammed his fist off the table with all his might, making even the fearless Umber seem to recoil into his chair from the suddenness of his strike.

"We wiped them out!" he started, Robert's powerful voice booming off the rafters above as only the drums had before, taking Robb to the midst of the battlefield, to the clash of steel on steel. "We stormed them whilst they were still in their beds, blaring our horns as we charged down the hills! Half of their men thought it was their allies come to reinforce them, but when they heard the men cheering my name they ran for their arms and armor, but by then, it was over, and their entire army, nearly a thousand men, were either dead or my prisoners."

"How did you hold so many prisoners when there were more enemies on the way?" Robb asked, curious. "Wouldn't they have rebelled when Lord Fell arrived?"

"These men were sworn to their lord, and their lord was my hostage," Robert said. "We put them into what was left of Summerhall and left them there. With Lord Cafferen kept by my side, they couldn't escape without guaranteeing that they would die, and it gave me a chance to talk Lord Cafferen onto our side. He died at Ashford, but I would be damned if I didn't say that he fought harder for us than he ever did for the dragons."

"Anyway," the king said next, relaxing into his seat once more. "We formed up for battle, next, since we knew the sound of our horns would have been heard by the Grandisons, who we had been told
had set march the day before and were expected to arrive that day. I split my horse into two groups, sending them east and west, just over the hills, and waited with my foot outside Summerhall, on the flattest bit of land I could find, and not long after all that was done we saw the sleeping lion on their banners coming over the hills."

"His men must have been tired out from the march," Robb said.

"Aye, they were, but he urged them on anyway," Robert answered with an approving nod. "He had been worried about being caught by me on his way to Summerhall and picked off, so he had force marched his men day and night to get them there, through the rain too. They charged, but their heart wasn't in it anymore, not after they saw the fallen Cafferen banners there too. When my horse looped around and struck their flanks and rear, they shattered like glass."

"What about Lord Fell?"

"He came last, and we were ready for him when he did," the warrior-king smiled. "He moved like a tortoise, slow but certain, till he came to a halt on the hills and dared us to come to him, his men in one long shield wall bristling with pikes and blades. Even with superior numbers, pushing up a hill would be hard and my men were worn out from the other two battles. I could have taken the hill, but not without losing much of my army, so I did something else."

"You feinted by staging a mock withdrawal from the field so as to incite Lord Fell to advance down the hill and give up his position," Vaenyris said, leaning forward. "Then you turned around, catching him by surprise with a frontal and three pronged assault to break his shield wall apart on the, then driving the resulting wedge into the center of his forces where you slew him in single combat."

"You had to ruin the surprise, didn't you?" Robert laughed before asking, curious. "How did you know about that part, anyway? Do they tell stories about the rebellion in Volantis?"

"Of course," the tiger answered with a smile. "The old Valyrian Freeholders liked to stay aware of whatever wars were being waged in the world, so that they would have a chance to learn of any new tactics or weapons and whether or not they might have a place in their own armies. Volantis is the same, but we also like to hear of our western cousins getting what they deserve from time to time."

"Aye, and we gave them what they deserved alright," Robert grinned. "We smashed them up and down the South from the Stormlands to the Riverlands before Tywin Lannister finished the job."

"But they did get one victory, didn't they?" Robb asked, hoping to hear how such a great general had been driven from the field. "At Ashford?"

Then Robb realized that he should not have mentioned that battle nor said that word, for the king fell quiet and all the joy went out of him, Robert falling back into his seat and letting out a sigh, resting his head on his right hand as if afraid to show his shame.

"Ashford was a mistake," je said with a low voice, not much louder than a whisper,

"...what happened at Ashford?" came the confused voice of Robb's sister, Arya not having had the same level of military tuition as any of the men or boys around her, with it being the usual for girls to learn more about the diplomatic side of things, the marriages that had created the grand alliance that had brought down the dragon kings and why there was a war in the first place, similar but not the same to the boys who were taught how the war was fought instead.
"Arya, you shouldn't ask the king about that," Dacey said softly whilst giving Arya a look that silenced any complaint.

"Ashford was the one and only battle between the rebels and the Tyrells during the war," Brynden Tully said quietly so that the king would not hear. "It did not go well. Many men loyal to Robert left their lives on that field in a rearguard action, stopping the Tyrells from chasing him down."

"If what you say is true, then the entire victory over the Targaryens can be placed on their shoulders," Vaenyris said, having somehow heard the Blackfish from further down the table. "They died heroes' deaths."

"They died **bravely** and they died with **honor**," the king said, looking towards the ground and consumed by a somber and tearless grief. "They died fighting in my name, but they still died."

"Your grace, perhaps it would be best to tell them another tale..." the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard said. "Your duel with Prince Rhaegar is always a good tale and you tell it well."

For a moment, there was silence.

And then Robert leaned forward again, taking a long sip of wine again before placing the silver cup on the table and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, only a few hints of his previous anguish left to hint at what had happened only a few moments before.

"And what a fight that was," Robert started, drawing in the attentions of all, even some of the servants who were still in the hall clearing the other tables. "I had been to dozens of tourneys that had Rhaegar amongst those riding there, and I never once had a chance to fight him. I thought he couldn't be too hard; he never fought in any of the melees at any of the tourneys, staying in the joust instead, so I thought he just stayed with what he was good at doing. Besides, what harpist ever killed anyone before?"

Robb laughed with his family and his wolves, and said: "Valaero the Vanquisher."

"Who's Valaero?" Robert asked his younger namesake, interested.

"He was a Valyrian general in command of a siege army during the Second Turtle War," Robb said as his Volantene tutor watched closely. "He found a Rhoynish prince trying to get his forces past a fast flowing river, so he had his men set up their scorpions and catapults and played his harp whilst they sank all the barges that tried to cross."

Robert laughed, then, and so did the others. "And how many men did he kill doing that?"

"The prince thought if he sent lots of barges at once he could overwhelm him and get ashore," Robb said as Horrono nodded in approval. "He lost eight hundred men since their armor dragged them under."

"Aye, well, I meant a harpist killing someone by **themselves,**" Robert said with amusement, growing more serious. "Anyway, let me tell you, I was expecting an easy fight against the dragon prince...and he gave me anything but. It was close."

"How close?" Bran asked with barely concealed excitement.

"Do you want to see how close it was?" Robert asked.
Bran nodded. In response, Robert rose from his seat once more, unfastening the buttons of his doublet and throwing it around the back of his seat, showing just how immensely built the warrior king of the Seven Kingdoms was, greater in bulk than even the Smalljon Umber or Donnel Snowstark, even through the linen shirt beneath. Undoing its top four buttons, he pulled the left side open, revealing his bared breast...

...and the most grisly scar that Robb had ever seen in his life, a horrid round and lumpy patch of discolored skin, two and a half inches to the bottom left of the nipple. Robb's jaw dropped at the sight of it, and all of them looked to their king with stunned amazement, for what they saw was not the scar of any slash wound, but the last remaining hint of a stab that should have killed any man, even the king.

"The maesters say if it had been even half an inch further up..." Robert snapped his fingers. "The gods Old and New must have been smiling on me then, since it damn well nearly went all the way through."

"Seven hells," Brynden the Blackfish muttered under his breath as he leaned close. "I heard you took a wound, but I thought it but a scratch or two, not anything like this. How in the Seven's name did it happen?"

"Rhaegar had found a dent in my armor caused by some fool thinking they could stab through plate like in the stories," Robert said as he sat down again, buttoning his shirt up once more. "They had put all their strength in the strike and had it hit at an angle that caused a dent, but did nothing more. When I was fighting Rhaegar, I was too quick for him to hit any of the joints in the armor and he never got the chance to make those strikes in the first place, but he could hit my breastplate enough to weaken it further."

"I didn't notice it at the time," the king continued. "But all those blows had deformed the plate enough that a stab wouldn't be able to roll off the armor anymore, but you'd need a thin blade of good metal to get through, to put all the force on one point. So he dropped his sword, pulled out a Valyrian steel dagger and stabbed the dent as quick as he could and with all the strength he had left."

Then Robert laughed.

"I hadn't even realized I had been stabbed at first," the king said as all watched in silence. "I just crushed his left knee with a blow from my hammer to send him crashing to the ground before bringing it down on his head. You wouldn't have been able to tell he was a Targaryen after that. The royalists heard the strike and saw him fall, and they ran. Brynden led the charge that swept the last of them from the field, and I made it around twenty feet before I collapsed and passed out."

"Then I woke up a day later with the maester, Jon Arryn, your father and a septon giving me my last rites, and that was that," the king finished.

"How did the maester save you?" Jon asked with amazement.

"I was lucky," Robert said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"He means he was too stubborn to die," Brynden said, the king laughing. "Rhaegar mustn't have hit anything important."

"That was the maester's guess, and Grand Maester Pycelle took a look after the war and said the
same as well," Robert said. "I'll tell you though, it woke me up. It made me realize that if I had been even a second slower than I was then it would have been me who died that day, not him."

"His grace has made sure to practice his skill at arms regularly since that day," the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard informed the gathered northmen. "I would say that he is an even greater warrior now than he was then."

"Aye, it helps to keep me sharp," Robert smiled before starting to ask questions of his own, "Anyway, what do you boys know about the south? Did Ned or Cat ever tell you much about it?"

"Not too much," Robb said truthfully as the Wolves of Winterfell watched and nodded with his words. "We know about the Faith, knights and the kingdoms, but none of us have actually ever been there for ourselves."

"So, like me and the North, eh?" Robert japed, getting a laugh out of them all. "I'm hoping to try and get that father of yours to come down with me to King's Landing, help me pick up from where Jon Arryn had left off before he died...and might be we could have a chance to return the hospitality," the king said with a warm smile. "Show you all how we feast in the land of summer, aye, and show you how we live too."

"You would welcome us to King's Landing?" Robb asked, surprised. "To the Red Keep?"

"Of course," Robert laughed. "The North might be far away from the south, so far that we barely ever get a chance to interact with one another, but we're still friends. The North and the South, the First Men and the Andals, the gods Old and New, they go together like bread and butter, and the rebellion proved it. Your families helped me win my throne, only fair that you all get a chance to see what it was that they fought for."

Robb looked to his half-brother, then, to Jon, and he smiled. A chance to visit the southern realms was a rare thing, one his father would not easily allow, not if it meant being away from Winterfell for too long...but to have the king extend the invitation, to be offered royal hospitality in the Red Keep itself...who could ever say no to such a thing, without being seen to have rejected the generous offer of their king and ally? The South was a place that was similar but different to the North, and distant, but that made it only all the more tempting to visit - would they have bare fisted melees there like they did in the North, or would they have set aside such a tradition in favor of something else, something Robb had never known before? Would they have truly cut down their godwoods, or would they still have wierwood trees in their castles, with their own faces so utterly different from those in the North? Would it be the land of unending green and golden sunlight that he had always been told that it was, a land where seeds could simply be thrown onto the soil to grow with no effort and where the fruits grew so large on the trees as to be bigger than his fist?

He didn't know, but he wanted to find out...but how could he? He would have to go south, and he could only go south if his father went south...but if he could talk his lord father into going with the king, then Robb would be able to go with him - for a time, since he knew he would have to return to Winterfell before long to rule in his father's stead - and see all that the heart of the South had to offer just as the royal family had in Winterfell. And who knows what he could do whilst in the South?

There would be dozens of battlefields just on the way from Winterfell to King's Landing, and hundreds more in easy reach - he could visit the Trident where the last and greatest battle of Robert's Rebellion had been fought, or even go to the west shore of the God's Eye lake where the Winter Wolves had charged the forest of Lannister spears five times till the Westermen ran into the lake, willing to risk death by drowning rather than face the certainty of being run through on a Northern
lance, the bloodiest battle of the entire Dance of the Dragons...and a crushing defeat for the greens that they nearly didn't recover from. Then there was the Bloody Meadow that had been the sight of the final battle of the first and greatest of the Blackfyre Rebellions, the Battle of the Redgrass Field that had been the place of Daemon Blackfyre's legendary charge, or the Field of Fire, or Wailing Willows, or the Last Storm, or -

"Aye, I don't need to ask your answer to know what you want," Robert said to Robb as he grinned. "You want to see the Trident? I'll take you there on the way south and show you the exact spot I caved in Rhaegar's helm, and that goes for all of you."

Then there was a cheer from around the table, the noise of friends as enthusiastic about the idea of visiting the southern kingdoms as Robb himself was and just like his brother Jon, grinning widely at the thought of being able to visit such places for himself, even the Volantene citizen was seemingly content with the idea, eager to allow them a chance to see such historic battlefields for themselves. All that meant that there was only the small matter of convincing his father into letting them go, but that would surely not be too difficult?

After all, it was not as if they were going to spend much more than a month there at most, and that was a little enough time that Winterfell and the North would be able to run without either of them.

"We're going to have to get father to take us south with him," Robb said to his half-brother. "I've always wanted to see the Trident. It was one of the biggest battles Westeros has ever had."

"That's if he is going south," Jon reasoned. "What if he doesn't want to go?"

"Then we'll have to talk him into going," Robb smiled as Bran leaned over and nodded in agreement. "If me, you and Bran all ask for him to go south, he'll go south."

"It won't be for a time, yet," Robert said to the three of them. "It took me a month to come all this way up here, I might as well stay for a week or two. Give your father time to think about what I said."

"I think he'll be happy to go with you, your grace," Robb said. "I could talk to him though..."

Then Robb smiled again as the king looked on, and he said quietly, "...for a trip to Summerhall."

Robert roared with laughter, then, striking his palm off the table. "A deal!"

Jon laughed with the rest of the Wolves. "You bargained with the king!"

"And now we get to go to Summerhall with him," Robb smiled.

"Can I come?" Arya asked, hopeful.

"I don't see why not, so long as your father allows you to come," the king shrugged before looking at her and Dacey in confusion. "...and actually, why are you two here? I hadn't thought any ladies here would be interested enough in my war stories to stay up so late to listen to them."

"There's no reason why Northern ladies can't do it if they want to," Dacey answered as Arya looked on. "Besides, who wouldn't want to hear you talking about smashing Targaryens?"

"Other Targaryens," Horrolo said with mild amusement.
"And what's your story, Horrono?" Robert asked, curious. "How did you get so far away from home?"

"My "story", as you Westerosi call it, is little to talk about," the tiger answered. "I learnt the way of war from the greatest mind in such things alive, and decided to spread such knowledge so that it might not die out."

"I don't remember teaching you," Robert said as a jape, making all those who were around him laugh. "Go on."

"There is little more to it than that, your grace," Vaenyris answered, swilling his wine slowly. "But if you are curious to know more, then I suppose I may as well say more. I am from within the Black Walls, the true heart of Volantis, as you can no doubt tell by my appearance and manners. My people are the last of Valyria's true heirs, keeping to the ways of the Freehold even four hundred years since the Doom, and it is a pleasant place where the rule of law is strong and where rulers and the course of the freehold is determined by elections."

"My people are pleasant to be around, truly, but I desired a chance to see how the peoples of other lands lived, and so here I am," Vaenyris finished. "Besides, it keeps me out of the politicking at home. As a man from the Red Keep, you must understand how tiresome it gets to deal with that sort of thing."

"More than you realize," Robert sighed. "So, you named for that general of theirs?"

"Ah, you mean Horonno," Vaenyris said with a smile, pleased to know that the Westerosi king knew some of the city's history. "No. His name was banned after the revolt."

"But you're named Horrono?" Robb asked with surprise.

"And I am," Vaenyris answered. "My name is spelled differently, with two Rs and one N. His was the other way around. Completely different."

"Aye, well, I best be getting to bed before that wife of mine thinks I've taken the Black or something," the king japed, rising from his seat and taking his doublet from its back, throwing it around his shoulders as though it were a coat. "We'll talk more tomorrow, eh?"

"Of course, your grace," Robb said, stretching out in his own seat with a yawn that his brothers Jon and Bran soon caught. "My father didn't want me up too late tonight, so I best be going as well, and it'd probably be good for everyone else to do the same."

There was a murmur of acknowledgements and agreements all around the table, then, with Torrhen Karstark poking his sleeping brother before shaking him awake as Robb and his brother downed what was left of their now lukewarm drink, just as the rest of the Wolves did, rising from their seats and allowing the last few servants left to clear the table. The king turned and went, the Lord Commander following close behind, and Brynden Tully looked around for a moment, confused, and Robb was about to offer him directions when the Blackfish started off on his way back to his own chambers, wherever they were in the castle. Then, with every minute that passed, the few wolves of his that had remained up so late began heading off to their own chambers, following Dacey and Arya out, and Robb followed, with Jon at his side, striding towards the doors that were besides the dais and led towards the steps that were the way to his chambers.
"Robb, may I speak with you for a moment?" his Volantene mentor asked, rising to his feet.

"Of course," Robb answered before turning his head towards his half-brother. "It shouldn't take too long."

"I'll wait for you by the stairs, then," Jon said before smiling. "Someone needs to make sure you make it up the steps well with how much wine you drank. Your mother would never believe me if I said you slipped."

"I'm not that drunk, Jon," Robb laughed as he walked across the room again, towards his mentor, the two the only ones in the hall. "What is it?"

"Be careful around that man," Vaenyris warned quietly. "He is more cunning than you might think, his battlefield strategy is proof enough of that."

"Who?" Robb asked, as quiet as he was concerned.

"The king," the Volantene answered, rising to his full height at last, leaving the cup upon the table. "Do you truly think that it is by coincidence that the Lord Paramount of the Westerlands and the King of the Seven Kingdoms come to Winterfell immediately after the death of the Lord Paramount of the Vale and the Hand of the King?"

"I don't think Robert had anything to do with that," Robb said, certain of his words. "Father says that he was like another son to Jon Arryn."

"And neither do I think that Robert had anything to do with it," the Volantene said softly. "But I think that the two of them know more than they are willing to say, and that whatever it is it is surely of importance for the two to travel from one side of the realm to the other so abruptly..."

Then the Volantene went quiet, arms crossed and deep in silent thought.

"He clearly means to make your father Hand of the King," he said at last. "That is an obvious fact, and one you must have already realized by now, and he means to use you and your friends and their desire to visit the south as a means to encourage your father into doing the same. But why is Tywin Lannister here?"

Robb's eyes narrowed as the Volantene spoke.

"He could not be here to try and take the position for himself, for he would have had plenty of opportunity to make his position known at King's Landing, years before the death of Jon Arryn. His family's influence at court, certainly great with his daughter as the king's bride, would have made it easy to assume power even if the Hand kept the title, so it is certain he cannot be after the position."

"Then...what?" Robb asked, his best wits clouded by drink and tiredness. "If King Robert wishes to make my father Hand and Tywin Lannister doesn't want the position, then what is the problem?"

"The problem is Tywin Lannister," Vaenyris explained quickly. "He should not be here without a reason, and tell me, what reason is there that could send the Lord of Casterly Rock, one of the most powerful men in the South, on a journey towards one of the most powerful men in the North?"

"...it has to be important," Robb said. "Maybe...maybe Lord Tywin knows something important? Something about the death of Jon Arryn?"
"Perhaps, but I would think that unlikely," Vaenyris said, dismissing the thought. "If that was the case then he could have simply passed the message onto the king or to the queen and had it delivered without needing to leave the Westerlands and without putting himself in harm's way, and in any case the Lannister's are bound to the crown, their interests match those of Robert, so they would have been able to give him the information directly and had him deal with the matter before he came to Winterfell in the first place..."

"...unless he believes that the Lannister position at King's Landing is not so secure as it should be," the tiger said with growing realization. "It would seem the Lion of Lannister thinks that something is afoot in the capital, and that whatever information he has must be delivered to your father in person and with the least risk of discovery."

"But what does this have to do with Robert? Why would Tywin come with the king if..."

...and then it fell into place.

"Tywin's here because he realizes that the king is tired of Lannisters," Robb said, speaking as quickly as he could think. "He knows that whatever secret he's found, the king won't believe it because he will think it is an excuse to expand Lannister power at court. He needs to tell my father so my father can tell Robert, because anything important that my father tells Robert will have the king act."

"Precisely," Vaenyris said, nodding. "It would seem we have some intrigues afoot."

"Then...what do we do?" Robb asked. "Should we tell my father?"

"No," Vaenyris said at last. "Sometimes knowing the move that someone is going to make and why they are doing so is more valuable than gold. Like a leader of a kingdom at war, sometimes it can be best to wait and see what one's opponent is doing, so that their true goal might be revealed and planned for. We will wait. Quick thinking means quick mistakes."

Robb nodded...and then the door besides the dais opened again, and Jon peeked through.

"Are you coming?"

"I apologize for keeping your brother so long," Vaenyris said with a deep and respecting bow, taking Robb's bastard-brother by surprise with his deference. "I best retire for the evening myself. I will see you again tomorrow."

And with that, the Volantene turned and exited, walking to one of the staircases besides the great hall that led to the chambers that were attached directly onto the side of the great hall's upper levels, a place where the castle's visiting entertainers and the like might rest in an almost lordly comfort between their shows, leaving Robb to cross the hall to his brother alone.

"What was that about?" Jon asked, tired but curious. "You were talking for longer than I thought you would."

"It was nothing much," Robb answered. "Just another lesson about politics."

"Another?" Jon asked with surprise. "Just how many times has he spoken to you about all that?"
"More than you know," Robb said wearily. "I probably know more about how Volantis works than the Volantenes do."

"Does father know he's teaching you that?" Jon asked, curious.

"He must do," Robb reasoned with a shrug of his shoulders as they exited out into the hallway behind the Great Hall, quiet but for the soft sound of their footsteps and the occasional creaking of the slowly cooling fortress. "He's the one who hired him, and he's very, very clever."

"Do you really think he got bored of Volantis, though?" Jon asked, concerned. "Half of Westeros wouldn't let a man who knew armies half as well as him go wherever they want."

"I think he is telling the truth," Robb replied as they climbed up the steps. "I don't think he would lie about it. There isn't a need to. Even if they banished him from the city for whatever reason, Volantis has no power here."

Then he looked to his brother and smiled. "How were things between you and Joy?"

With that, his brother made a sound that was half a laugh and half a sigh, for both Robb and Jon knew full well why the bastard niece of the Lord of Casterly Rock had been brought to Winterfell and introduced to the castle's own, unmarried and unbetrothed bastard. "Busy. She wanted me to escort her around the city since she had never been to the North before. So I did."

"And?" Robb teased. "Is she going to be Lady Snow?"

"She wants to be," Jon answered, embarrassed by the question. "I showed her everything I thought she might be interested in. I took her to the marketplace and showed her the things on sale, the wierwood trees that they have watching the stalls, everything."

"What did she think of it all?"

"She was curious about everything, like why we have the trees there," Jon answered. "But other than things like that I barely ever had to explain anything about our ways to her, since she could figure it all out on her own. She's very intelligent...but she reminds me of her uncle. She doesn't smile because she's expected to smile, and you can tell."

"...but she was happy, wasn't she?"

"I think so," Jon answered with a sigh. "She's like a statue. She can hide her feelings so well that I can't tell if she's happy or not. She seemed to be interested, though. She asked a lot of questions, nothing dangerous, just things like how people go from one place to another at the start of spring when the snow is only starting to melt or how the houses have enough food to last the whole winter."

"Did she ask anything about you?"

"More than I knew how to answer," Jon said, laughing to himself. "She wanted to know how I was raised, if it was different from her own experiences. Her uncle's treated her well, but he's made sure she never forgot that she was a bastard, whilst..."

"Father lets you feel as though you were trueborn?" Robb asked with a low and quiet voice.
"Sometimes," Jon said, smiling slightly. "I know Lady Stark doesn't like it...but sometimes I do feel like we're full brothers, not half ones. Joy never had any of that. She didn't have half brothers or half sisters, just cousins, and she didn't even get a chance to really know her own father before he disappeared whilst out looking for Brightroar."

"She's only ever really had Tywin," Robb said. "So that's probably why she takes after him."

"I think you're right," Jon answered. "But she's...softer than her uncle. She doesn't smile much, she doesn't like to talk unless she's been spoken to first or anything like that, but she does have a gentler side. She showed it at the table."

"Does she have a harder side, though?" Robb asked. "It can be difficult in the North. You've seen how mother...Lady Stark is, in her sept by herself."

"I don't know," Jon answered honestly. "If she has one, she hasn't shown it...I wouldn't be surprised if she doesn't act like her uncle entirely, then. But do you think..."

"Think what?"

"...should I marry her?" Jon asked, quiet and hesitant.

"I can't answer that for you," Robb laughed as they reached the top of the stairs, his brother glaring at him coldly. "Sorry, Jon. But I can't."

"I mean, there are reasons to," Jon said as he considered carefully. "I don't know if we would love eachother...but I think we could be friends. And she's clever and would come with a good dowry, so we could make a good start with the lands we get."

"Jon, you're not even six and ten," Robb said with amusement. "Father won't want any of us marrying till then anyway, just so we all know what we're doing, and you mightn't get your land till your twenty. Arnolf Snowstark didn't get his till then, and he put his first man in the ground at eight."

"Do you think I should wait, then?" Jon asked. "I mean -"

"She's been hinting at it, hasn't she?" Robb asked with crossed arms. "Trying to get you to make a betrothal before you've had a chance to think on it."

"A little."

"Well...don't," Robb said with a shrug. "You've got years before then, and its not like she'll be married off before then either. You're the best marriage she can wish for, and her uncle knows it."

"I'm being stupid, aren't I?" Jon said, laughing as his half-brother nodded and as the two stood before the well sealed door that kept the cold of the stairwell from coming onto the floor where the Stark children slept. "I'll speak with her tomorrow when I get the chance. She'll probably like that I want to take my time with it, seeing as she takes after her uncle so -"

Then there was a scared yelp from the other side of the door, a cry that Robb knew to be his pup's and a cry that made his pulse roar in his ears in an instant. He grabbed the handle and threw the door open with his left hand and reached for a knife with his right, his hand finding nothing, and when the door opened...
...he saw the scared, little direwolf pup that was his own, still small and still young and still dependent on his mother for food, with so thick a coat of fur as to make his legs almost invisible in the thick grey that was the very same color as his family's banners, huddling besides his door, tiny little markings left in the wood where it had been scratching, and it looked towards the window at the end of the hall, still open and still letting in a draft, still revealing the pitch black darkness of the outside world and the sleeping city that was barely lit by starlight and a few of the city's oil lamps, kept burning in summertime so as to get their attendants practiced and ready for doing so in winter and autumn.

The tiny direwolf's head snapped towards its master, and it ran across the floor as quickly as it could, terrified, and Robb bent down, picking up his grey wolf. His mother had thought it best for them to be separated from their wolves for a little time, to avoid the risk of scaring the royals, and the shewolf had surely agreed and gathered them up in a warm part of the castle before wrapping herself around...something that his pup must have surely found a way to escape.

He held it close against him, trying to soothe its fear with a quiet, reassuring hum and a gentle touch of the back of his hand, but the pup was utterly terrified, trembling with fear against him, with his tiny tail tucked away and with paws desperately reaching for a place to hide in, even a pocket.

"Gods," he said, rubbing his wolf's little body. "What's gotten into you? You've never been this scared before."

"It must be the window," Jon said, striding across the hallway with cautious side steps and with fists clenched, ready for a fight even without a weapon close at hand. "Is someone there?"

There was the fluttering of broken wings, and a sound the likes of which he had never heard before, a sound that sent chills running down his spine and made the pup's cry in utter terror. Jon looked back towards his brother with fear, true fear, and then he looked out into the darkness, reaching out onto the roof of the castle with a bare and trembling hand...

...and then he pulled back a raven. It fluttered in his grip, half trying to take flight and half trying to swoop and half trying to land, utterly confused and utterly mad, and it made a shrill and piercing cry that stabbed to his soul, its beak snapping out in all directions.

It shook wildly in Jon's grip as Robb's bastard brother brought it in with eyes stunned by the sight before them, the bird crying crimson tears as its mouth frothed with white foam like a rabid beast, and Robb thought to shout to his brother to drop the damned thing, to throw it out and back into the darkness from whence it came, but the words choked in his throat, suffocated by unnatural terror as he watched the convulsing bird shaking, trying to do everything and nothing at once.

This was not right, his mind screamed, this was not natural, his body shouted, run his instincts commanded.

Then it went silent.

The bird fell still, dead.

The air changed. Normalcy returned.

"Robb..." Jon said with shaking hands and cheeks covered in tears.

"It has three eyes."
Chapter End Notes

And boy oh boy oh boy, was this a fun part to write :)

I'd give you all a summary, but I'm just sitting down to dinner and...what the heck, I'm sure you all can handle this part without any explanation of the things in it, hmm? :D
Viserys smiled widely to himself as the small merchantman's off-white sails fluttered in the winds overhead and as her wooden prow cut through the gentle waters like a knife slowly slipping through cheese, their progress slow but steady and the horizon all around them free of ships, with not a single sign of a pursuer who might have come onto their course when they had passed through the pirate's forest of the Stepstones. Even still, the more martial members of the crew stayed alert, staying on the fore and aft castles of their ship and looking out across a blue sea bathed with the golden light of the afternoon sun with anxious movements, hatchets and long knives, the tools of a sailor's trade, not far out of reach...but his escorts, the first three men to come to the dragon banners once more, were more leisurely, more certain. Brandon, the Northern warg, was by the port side of the ship, watching as his great and golden eagle circled above only to occasionally dip towards the ship's timbers to rest and to feed, as Viserys knew that this ship's holds were packed to the brim with grains and cheeses and other foods, making pests and the things that might feed on them abundant...and there was no easier meal for a bird of prey than a mouse that had not the first idea of how to escape an eagle's crushing talons, or a kind of seagull who had never once before had to deal with the threat of such a predator swooping down on them at such great speed.

The occasional sight of their half eaten remains littering the deck were proof enough of that.

But whilst the skinchanger contented himself with leaving his bird to hunt and watch and occasionally taking control of it himself so that he might see their surroundings from the skies above in the way that only the dragonriders of old had once done, watching the waves with an eagle's eyes, Tygett Lannister was quietly pacing about, arms crossed, armed and armored for battle, deep in whatever thoughts were his own. There was no doubt in Viserys' heart that Tygett was a loyal man and true, for he had been given every opportunity to fell the last of the Targaryens through their journey from Pentos, every opportunity to capture them both and take them to the Usurper atop his stolen throne in King's Landing, to send them to a wretched end in the black cells or to have their heads put atop the gates as a symbol of one last, final victory over the true and rightful ruler of the Seven Kingdoms. No, Tygett was surely loyal, no matter how little he might seem to be at ease with their journey, that Viserys was certain...

...but of the sellsword Bronn, dicing with the crew below decks, he was less certain. Mercenaries, no matter how noble they might appear or how they seemed to appear at the time in which they were needed most, were never to be trusted. His father had told him that during the Usurper's revolt, saying to the court why it was that he refused to hire sellswords to expand the royal army during the war, and for good reason; what good were sellswords if they promised to strike down one's enemy only to turn upon their former master due to receiving more gold from the other?

Such beams of logic and reason that his father so often gave was proof that he was not the mad king the traitors said he was, iron...perhaps. Lawful? Certainly. But never mad. Never.

Once he had his throne, however, he would make sure that such blatant lies would be struck from all
the realm's chronicles and history tomes, so that his family's name, so that his father's name would not be besmirched by such filth, but first the rebels would have to be dealt with, and none more so than the Baratheons, who owed their very existence to the Targaryens and who had been spared a traitor's punishment for their rebellion barely a century before in the days of his great-grandfather's rule out of nothing but the love by which the Targaryens had for their cousins who had turned their backs on them twice before. He could easily have Robert Baratheon, the Usurper himself, sent to the rack and made to endure a lifetime of torment, but Viserys would be a generous and noble king, as his father had been, and would give him a chance to take the black, to allow him to contemplate a lifetime of treachery whilst carrying out the honorable duties of the Night's Watch, or failing that, a swift end on the block, just as he would for all the others.

But first, there was the matter of taking back his throne, and seeing his sister-wife back to the castle they had been forced to leave so long before, so the dream of justice would have to wait, and so he turned his attentions to his sister-wife, his queen, making sure that she was alright, as a good husband and a good king should.

"Are you well, Daenerys?" he asked, walking over to his sister, his wife leaning onto the wooden railings of the starboard side of the ship. "You have said little today."

"I feel seasick," she said quietly and with a pale face, one hand on the railing and the other over her upset middle. "I don't like sailing."

"Don't worry, sweet sister," he said with a reassuring smile and a quiet, gentle voice. "We will be at Volantis soon, and once we are there you won't need to go on a ship till we take back our throne...and then you won't ever have to sail again if you do not wish it."

"Truly?"

"Truly," he said with a nod. "If my queen does not wish to to sail, then we will not sail."

Daenerys smiled, then, however weakly it might have been. Ever since their wedding, ever since their bedding, the two had grown closer, much so, and Viserys felt as though his sister was becoming more comfortable with the role that she was to have at his side, as his wife and as his queen, a gentle and softhearted woman with love for all. She had started to lose much of the tonguetied silences that he knew she had gone through ever since she was little now that he not only allowed her to speak freely, but encouraged it; the woman who would help rule the Seven Kingdoms at his side, just as how their mother had always told him how she helped their father, would need to be able to speak boldly and proudly in order to win the affections of young maidens the realm over, so that all of Westeros would love his Daenerys just as much as he did.

Such was how his mother and father had their marriage, and so it would be how he would have his.

"So," he said, leaning close to stand alongside his lady wife, smiling and warm and trying to take her mind from the voyage and from the motion of the waters beneath their ship, as any good husband would. "What will you do first, once we take the Red Keep?"

"...I am not sure..." she answered, thinking. "Maybe I will look at the dragon skulls."

"From what I know, the Usurper has taken them down," Viserys said, putting an arm around his wife and holding her close against his side. "But once we have our throne, I will have them put up on the walls again."
His sister smiled, then. "Are they really as big as you say they are?"

"Bigger," he said, his voice as gentle as he could make it. "And none are bigger than Balerion's. His was always over the Iron Throne, with Vhagar's to his left and Meraxes' to his right."

"I want to see them when I can," his sister said, hopeful.

"And you will," he said, his words as much an encouragement as they were a promise. He would never allow the Usurper and his brood to keep the throne that was by all the rights of gods and men meant to be his, no matter how long the struggle might take. "And if the Volantenes hear us...then mayhaps we might go home sooner than we thought."

"Do you truly think they will help us?" his wife asked, hopeful. "None of the magisters ever did..."

"...until we met Illyrio Mopatis," Viserys answered, squeezing her hand. "Our fortune is looking up, sweet sister. Barely a year ago it was just you and me and barely enough coin to feed ourselves with, but now we have two knights of our own, the first men to come back to our side, and more coin than we need to live well, if perhaps not enough to buy an army. We're closer than we have ever been. All we need now is help, and we are not nearly as helpless as we were before, and the Volantenes are our cousins. They will help us if we give them a reason to, since we helped them against the Three Daughters a century ago."

"Who were the Three Daughters?" his sister asked, curious and lacking the teachings that a maester had given to her brother, even if he had taught her everything he knew about words and sums. "Were they queens, too?"

"They were queens, but they were cities, not women," Viserys said with a teasing voice, making his sister-wife laugh. "Myr, Lys and Tyrosh had allied together not long before the Dance of the Dragons, to drive the Volantenes from the Disputed Lands, but they kept their alliance together and used their strength to claim the Stepstones, clearing out the pirates so as to take the isles for themselves. They put a toll on every ship that passed through, which led to Daemon Targaryen invading the islands with the support of the Iron Throne and a Velaryon fleet."

"Then, the Dance of the Dragons happened," Viserys continued. "Ser Otto Hightower, an ambitious lord who wanted to use the power of the Iron Throne for his own ends, convinced the Three Daughters to make war on the blacks, Queen Rhaenyra's side. They accepted, and they attacked the Velaryons and destroyed their fleet before sacking Driftmark and destroying Spicetown, but they lost most of their ships in doing so, and they never really recovered."

"The Volantenes, who had been asking for our help as a way to make amends for King Aegon's attack during the Age of Blood, took the opportunity to claim their vengeance," Viserys finished with a smile. "We gave them coin to help with their advance, and sent our own fleets to blockade Lys and Tyrosh so as to cut them away from their ally. Volantis won, and their return to prominence and the bleeding of the Three Daughters made the alliance collapse. Now Volantis is one of the mightiest of the Free Cities again, with them, Myr and Braavos all vying for first."

"Volantis is strong for more than that," Tygett Lannister said as he walked over, keeping out their titles in order to help keep their true identities a secret. "They've been gaining strength for years, since all the wealth of the Jade Sea that goes onto Westeros has to pass through their ports first, and half the world gets its sugar from Volantis too. That's how they had the strength to smash Qohor."
"How did the Qohoriks lose?" his little sister asked. "I thought they were guarded by the Unsullied?"

"They were," Tygett said. "But the Unsullied aren't invincible. They're tough, but they don't adapt well. They're taught not to, and they don't object to orders even if they are mad, so when Volantis started winning the Qohoriks had no idea how to respond and threw the Unsullied away for a loss of what to do with them."

"Besides," Tygett shrugged. "Any Westerosi knight can kill any Unsullied. They geld them so they're not tempted by women, but doing that means they end up losing much of their muscle the same way a castrated horse does, and it takes the fire out of them as well. Excellent guards. Terrible fighters."

"Do you know anything about the way that Volantene men make wa-"

"War galley ahead!" came Brandon's voice, loud enough to be heard, the crew's attentions snapping towards him in an instant. "They're sailing on a western course. Won't be long before they see us. Looks too proper to be a pirate galley"

"How in the name of the gods do you know that?" asked one of the crew.

"I just do," Brandon smiled as he extended his right arm, his eagle swooping down and onto his vambrace, picking at its feathers with a golden beak. "A not-so-little bird told me."

"Aye, but he's telling the truth," the captain, a Pentoshi sailors named Maelo whose dark hair was turning silver with age, said as he peered to the east with a Myrish eye, a long tube of bronze with a pair of glass lenses at either side. "I see a war galley flying a violet sail and rowing as well. They must be in a hurry."

"Will they attack?" Viserys asked, quickly, hand finding the pommel of his longsword, an old weapon that he had trained with for year on year at King's Landing when he was still but a boy. "Are we in danger?"

"I couldn't tell if they were pirate or otherwise without getting too close," Brandon said. "It might be that they're just a patrol."

"Or it might be that they are a pirate," Maelo sighed. "We stand little chance if they are. But they might simply be a patrol ship, as he says...I can't tell from here."

Then, in the distance, Viserys heard the unmistakable sound of drums, echoing off the waters, like distant thunder. The men readied themselves for battle, bringing up crossbows and shortbows and whatever tools they might have which could be used as weapons, axes and hatchets and awls and even a few falchion like swords made for chopping through rope, but Viserys knew that the only men on the ship able to fight well were his knights and himself, and only they were armored. He marched to the other side of the deck, leaning over the railing to see the two decked warship coming closer, closer, purple sails billowing in the winds as a hundred oars rolled into the waters and out again in their spiral pattern, pushing the ship towards them inch by inch and foot by foot. Immediately he turned about and threw his cloak around the shoulders of his sickly sister-wife, holding her hand for a moment and squeezing tightly to give her strength as he did up her hood and turned away to face the other side of the ship once more, hand on grip and ready should the intentions of the other ship be anything other than noble...and so he waited, with the others, ready, and he felt the approach of the war galley and the ripples it made in the water through his boots before it saw it up close.
And he saw on its prow a glittering golden figure that was none other than the dragon, its wings spread and sweeping back to the ship's timbers.

He blinked at the sight, staring, and his gaze was only broken by the sudden bang of a grapnel striking the hull and its clattering as it was pulled across the deck to hook onto the railing, followed by another, then another, then another, and then a boarding ramp. He swallowed hard, his brow beginning to dampen with a mixture of sea mist and sweat; it was surely not any of the Usurper's dogs, for none would sail with the dragon's head on its prow, and sails that were in the iconic color of the Volantenes made it certain that it was from their destination...but what reasons would they have for stopping a single, lowly merchant ship on its way to them? Would they be willing to hand over the Targaryen exiles to the Usurper, when everything was going so well?

He hoped and prayed otherwise...or for at the very least that they would not be recognized for who they were. Viserys had made sure to hide all the crests and sigils that might mark them as the rightful rulers of Westeros from the moment they had left Illyrio's manse, even going so far as to hide the dragon eggs beneath a layer of clothing so that they would not be found.

Then there was the sound of heavy, armored boots walking across the deck of the great warship besides them, Tygett and Brandon readying themselves for a fight should their blades be needed...

...and instead of being met with swords, they were met with words.

"Hail and well met!" said a clear and soft voice, bearing the smooth tones of a man of high birth, its speaker revealed as he stood on the side of the Volantene warship. He bore the Valyrian look, of silver hair that reached down to his shoulders and eyes of a dark amethyst, high cheeked and hard jawed and covered in a swaying hauberk that was made of metal scales instead of rings, colored all the shades of blue and white of foaming sea water, covered by a mantle of turquoise wool clasped with a golden tiger facing a dolphin atop an anchor. "I am Aenar Tynaeris of Volantis, captain of the Lyria. Who is the captain of this vessel?"

"I am," Maelo answered quietly, wary of provoking the Volantenes as a group of Volantine troops appeared besides their captain, protected with the same sea colored armor as their commander but carrying powerful bows instead, with quivers on their hips fletched with blue and white. "Why have you boarded us so suddenly and without warning? We carry no cargo but grains from Andalos, bound for your city."

"I am not here to steal your cargo or to sell you into slavery, so if that was the cause for your worry you have no need to be concerned," Aenar answered, stepping down the ramp as his men stayed at the ready. "I merely have a few questions that I would like to ask, after which you will be to free to continue on your way, mayhaps even with a little more silver for your troubles."

Then the captain stepped onto their deck, and his sister wrapped her arms around herself and leaned against the railing, sick. He took her hand again, squeezing, but he never once took his eyes away from the Volantene captain or from his men, who stood watching with their bows and their ship's mighty scorpions at the ready. These were no sellswords, they were not even men-at-arms or knights, no, they were professional troops, drilled and barracked in the ways of Valyria of old, and these were ones who were trained entirely for fighting at sea and armed for the same. His knights, as valiant and as true they might be, would be little challenge for them should they want to storm their ship for whatever reason, though he prayed to all the gods he knew that such would not be needed.

"My first question is a simple one and one that should be easy for you to answer," the Volantene said
with a kinder, softer voice, at ease beneath the watching eyes of his seamen. "How many days away from Lys are you and ourselves?"

"A week and a half, mayhaps just a week with good winds," came the captain's careful answer. "But we sailed from Pentos, not from Lys."

"And how many Lysene ships have you spotted? Were they galleys? Merchantmen? Corsairs? Barges?"

"We have seen a few fishing boats and holks on the waters, and naught but a single war galley watching the Stepstones."

Then the captain began to smile, and not in the way that a man who had heard good news might...but in the way of a predator learning of wounded prey. It unnerved him to see.

"And did you stop in Lys, perchance? How were the markets?"

"To take on fresh supplies for the last part of our journey, aye," Maelo answered after a moment's thinking. "The markets were busy, as they usually are this time of year. A ship with holds full of Tyroshi steel had come into port not long before we had, so prices for good iron were low...I was half tempted to sell my grains there and pick up metalworks instead, but I chose not in the end."

"Thank you, you have been of great help," Tynaeris said cheerfully, reaching for his coin purse and plucking out a handful of gold coins before handing them over to the captain, who looked at them with surprise before turning towards the ramp and starting his way over.

Then he paused and turned, his eyes meeting Viserys' own as the exile king's heart thundered in his chest and ears, and then Aenar looked to Maelo as if he had saw nothing.

"I had almost forgotten the last question," Tynaeris said with amusement before growing serious once more. "Did you see any men belonging to the Company of the Wolf whilst there?"

"I did," Maelo muttered grumpily. "But I make sure to try and avoid those types, though I had little luck. They were by the harbormaster and the provisioners, even in the good inns where captains make deals with each other."

And with that, Aenar smiled again, more widely, and he turned and shouted something to his men in High Valyrian, making them laugh before turning back to the captain and leaving Viserys confused as to his meaning, his mind going back to those years so long before their exile or even before the Usurper's revolt, when his father had taken over teaching him of their family's Valyrian heritage from the Grand Maester, teaching him everything that he knew of the language, things that had been more useful in their exile than his father might have ever imagined.

"You have helped us more than you might think," Aenar smiled. "One of my men shall give you a banner to fly from your bow. You will have no more trouble from any Volantene whilst it is there, nor any tolls either. Consider it a reward for services rendered."

Maelo looked towards the Volantene captain in a stunned silence then, and just as quickly as Aenar had said it one of his men stepped down the ramp holding a banner three feet in height and just as many across, a grand sigil that would not shame any army to have carried into battle, a golden dragon upon a field of deep purple, wings unfurled and reaching out towards towards the tops of a great V that merged together beneath the dragon's tail and dominated the sigil, under which were
three High Valyrian glyphs, an old alphabet that was never once used in Westeros but on the isles of Dragonstone and Driftmark where the Targaryens had made their home years before the conquest, but he could read them still, if barely: FVP - the Freehold of Volantis and its Peoples. Brandon took it from the Volantene sea soldier before handing it over to one of the ship's sailor's, all whilst the captain grinned as widely as he could at the sight of it as Aenar returned to his own vessel, his men removing the grapnels and raising the ramp to leave and letting their ship continue on its way with nothing more, just as they had been promised, and instantly whatever tension there might have been in the air over being stopped by a purpose built warship faded and as they continued on their way, their ship slowly coming up to speed once more.

"That went better than I had expected," Tygett said with a smile, taking his hand from the grip of his sword. "I thought we were going to die."

"You weren't the only one," Brandon agreed with a nod and a sigh of relief. "Those bows wouldn't have cared if we were wearing plate or not at that range."

Viserys smiled, and turned back towards his wife, striding across the deck as he finally lowered his guard. "See, sweet sister? There was never anything to be worried about..."

Then he lowered his voice to a whisper, as he had before, just in case someone might otherwise overhear him.

"...we are safe from the Usurper here," he said, his voice lowered to a whisper in case someone might overhear them and put an end to either of them when they were so close to being safe. "We won't have to worry about his men in Volantis, not within the Black Walls."

Daenerys smiled again, then, touching his hand as he reached out and brushed a stray hair from her cheek. Even at times like this when she was at her worst, she looked stunning, as if the Maiden herself had stepped down from a pedestal and come to life, and he loved her, utterly, as his sister and as his wife, just as their father had loved their mother and been loved by her in turn. She deserved everything he could give her, everything, and she deserved to have a kingdom, just as he had promised all those years before to their mother on her deathbed, mayhaps she even deserved to have it more than Viserys did...Seven knew he might never be able to forgive himself for how harsh he might have been on her when she was young, ever concerned that every noise she might make could bring the Usurper's knives one step closer and ever stressed by the difficulty in finding food and drink for the both of them, and though he might have done things to her that he regretted, awful things that no brother and no king should ever do to their lady wife, he realized now, for a true dragon was as patient as he was graceful and gentle, like Jaehaerys the Wise and Viserys' own father, not prone to rash fits of anger and rage like Maegor the Cruel or Aegon the Unworthy. No, he would never hurt her, not again, ever, not even if their exile should last a thousand years, for such a thing was neither manly nor kingly, and Viserys was a man and a king both, and like father and brother both, he would never raise his hand against his bride, and he had sworn as much to her on their wedding night before their bedding.

He smiled again as he met her violet eyes, leaning in to kiss...

...and she gagged, and turned back towards the side of the ship. He sighed, gently patting her back, hoping they made it to Volantis soon so as to spare her from any further discomfort - this was not her first time on a ship, certainly not, and he had thought that she had outgrown such sickness by her tenth nameday, but it seemed otherwise, since it had come back with a furor that he had scarcely imagined, since it seemed that she was ill almost every morning, even if her stomach seemed to settle as the day went on. Once he had his throne, he would sooner find a way to bring the castles to her
Then, as before, there was a cry from the bow. "Gods above! There's a whole fleet!"

Viserys froze for a moment, almost not understanding what it was that had been shouted, then he spun on his heels, marching up the steps to the forecastle to see with his own eyes, to be sure what the crewman had said was true as Tygett moved to take his position alongside Daenerys, always one of the three on guard next to her to keep her safe from harm just as there was always another next to Viserys, Brandon this time, and Maelo was there as well, alongside.

Not even an aging man with failing sight would have needed a fareye to see what was ahead, for across the eastern seas, Volantis still perhaps an hour away, he saw a fleet greater than any he had ever dream to imagine, a thousand ships that stretched beyond the horizon, violet sails half reefed and oars rowing at a synchronized pace between all the ships, matching the the deep banging of drums that kept the entire fleet in an immense crescent, the entire battle formation moving at once in an incredible display of discipline. Smaller skirmish ships stayed upon the flanks of the great armada, carrying no more than fifty oars a piece, but they were built for speed and carried heavy rams at the front, gleaming golden in the sun, and the ships grew bigger and bulkier from the fringe to the core, where there were massive floating fortresses, veritable seagoing castles of wood and sailcloth bristling from one side to the other with scorpions and spitfires and catapults...some even carried trebuchets. The merchant ship, a dwarf facing giants, rocked from the immense ripples that came from such synchronized movements, and the air filled with the deafening bang bang bang of drums being struck on every ship, two heartbeats passing between every strike that he could feel in the wooden boards beneath their feet ever more strongly as they grew ever closer to the

Maelo rushed to the aftcastle of his ship, grabbing the tiller, the small piece of wood that connected down the rear of the hull to the rudder submerged in the waters below, and steered, carefully taking the humble cog through the middle by slipping it through the gap between one ship and another, and there, as the first ships passed them by, they saw the flagship at the very heart of the battlefleet...and the word colossal could barely describe it, for the immense warship was surely the Harrenhal of galleys, for Viserys had never seen one like it, not in the royal fleet that had hurried them to Essos, not in the ports of Braavos that had been ever visible outside the window of their manse and not in any other city that he had seen in their exile. It was a marvel of Volantene shipbuilding, a titan of six decks, three for oars as long in length as trees were in height and three for fighting, revealing through opened weapon ports more scorpions than could be found within any army, larger and more powerful than their land based cousins for fighting at sea. Some of them were even using chains instead of ropes and bolts that ended with grappling hooks instead of serrated points, made to shoot a grapnel far beyond the range of any sailor's throwing arm and to show that not even the fastest moving warship was safe from being boarded. But of all the things that struck him the most, it was the word written on the immense warship's aft in great golden letters, tall and proud beneath what was surely the admiral's palace.

Vhagar.

The same name as the ancient Valyrian god of war, on land, at sea and in the skies.

Viserys knew the name fit, and he was ever grateful for the banner flying from the merchantman's prow that spared them from whatever wroth such a mighty ship might be able to unleash in the throes of battle, and even more so to be free of the mobile islands that comprised a fleet that was meant for only one thing, one thing that made what the Valyrian captain said before make perfect sense in an instant. He set such thoughts aside as they emerged from the other side, swiftly continuing on their way as the winds began to turn to their side once more, the ship doubling in speed in just a few
minutes, and though he knew it would be an hour or even longer before they reached their destination, he knew it would be that day, he knew it would be soon, and so he waited at the railings, watching in silence till his sister climbed up the steps herself and stood besides him with Tygett not far behind, waiting for the place he hoped would be a safe home as much as an ally to come into view.

"What do you think they want to do," his sister asked quietly, feeling better now that the water was not shaking with the synchronized strikes of so many oars at once. "I mean, what could need so many ships?"

"I was wondering that myself," Viserys said quietly, not taking his gaze from the gently rippling waters ahead. "I couldn't understand what Captain Aenar had meant when he said in High Valyrian. It didn't make sense till I saw the fleet."

"What did he say?" his sister asked, curious but fearful.

"The gate is open."

"...you don't mean they're going to invade Lys?" Brandon asked with surprise. "The Lysene have a fleet just as big, but they've got defenses to stop themselves from being attacked by sea."

"Defenses that are no doubt currently being guarded by the Company of the Wolf," Tygett Lannister sighed. "I have a feeling the Lysene are about to find out that sellswords aren't worth nearly as much as they might hope."

"The sellswords will likely massacre the captains in their inns and do everything they can to keep the Lysene ships in port," Viserys said, looking to the horizon. "That will allow the Volantene's to claim them when the city falls."

"...and with so many ships, neither Myr nor Tyrosh will be able to interfere," Brandon murmured in understanding. "But they can't have enough troops on those ships to hold Lys, half the damned island is a city; they'd get picked to death in the streets."

"That's because they're not going to try and hold it, Bran," Tygett said, laughing. "They're going to sack the city. The ships aren't the defense, the ships are the prize. They're going to kick the door down and carry it off with them when they leave. I bet those ships aren't even carrying that many troops, since they'll need room for the "

"...but wouldn't Myr try to stop them if it means they become too strong?" his sweet sister asked.

"What reason would they have to, my queen?" Tygett answered, adding her proper title at last now that they were out of earshot of the rest of the crew. "Lys losing its fleet works to Myr's interests just as much as it does for Volantis. Without a fleet, their magisters will be forced to rely on the Myrish for protection. No doubt this is a move the Volantenes are making for a reason...whatever it is."

"Aye, and good luck figuring that out," Brandon smirked. "The Volantenes made that game with the little pieces that the highborn are so fond of. Cyvasse is it's name, I think. They play it a dozen moves ahead of what's on the board."

"They like strategy, but not that much, Bran," Tygett smiled before turning towards his king. "But still, they wouldn't do something like that for nothing. Might be we'll be able to find out once we reach Volantis...and that won't be long. Look."
And with that, Tygett raised his hand and pointed to a coast not far away, a false island made by the gap between two of the river Rhoyne's mouths covered in thousands of deep green trees specked with barely visible dots of orange that grew larger little by little as the merchantman came ever closer, all arranged in neat lines that stretched across the land and tended to by scores of workers.

"That's the Orange Shore," Tygett said. "There's not a foot of ground on the island that the Volantenes don't use for growing fruit on. The Dothraki don't come this far south anymore, not since Volantis gave them a beating ten years ago rather than pay tribute, but they wouldn't be able to reach it anyway. The water is too deep and fast for their horses and the Dothraki don't believe in boats."

"...if they don't believe in boats, then how in the seven hells did they get past the Rhoyne in the first place?" Brandon asked, confused.

"They went around," Tygett shrugged. "Besides, it's not like there aren't a few fords for them to cross further up. Not here, though. From here, the only crossing left is the one a few minutes ahead, on the fourth mouth of the Rhoyne. That's where Volantis is, and we'll be seeing it any minute now."

"When did you last go to Volantis, ser?" Viserys asked, curious, as they began passing the Orange Shore by.

"Four years ago," the Lannister answered. "Volantis needed mercenaries for the war against Qohor, and they were willing to pay well, and after the war we ended up staying there for a little bit longer, since the Volantenes sometimes have...political matters to settle."

"For street fighting?"

"More like indecisiveness, your grace," Tygett sighed. "The Volantenes have factions that rule their Freehold, and the elephants had been so uncertain of war that the tigers had to force it to happen by staging an incident that would force the Qohoriks to start one for them. Volantis crushed the Qohoriks without too much of a challenge, but even the tigers thought they'd put up more of a fight than they did, which is probably why Volantis didn't go for Norvos afterwards."

"It makes sense if they thought that they were not strong, but that Qohor was simply weak," Viserys said in understanding. "Are they?"

"Strong?" Tygett asked before saying more quietly, more seriously, lacking any of his Lannister playfulness. "You'll see for yourself soon enough, your grace, for if there is anyone in Essos, anyone, who can win you back your throne, it is the Volantenes."

And with that, Viserys smiled before looking back towards the waters...and at that moment the city revealed itself from beneath the horizon like a beautiful woman rising from beneath her blankets, and the sight was just as pleasant, for as far as the eye could see he saw the first and greatest of the Free Cities, the only one that could claim to truly be the Freehold's heir and the only one that carried on Valyria's legacy in faith, language and culture.

Volantis.

Even from where he was, so far away from the city, he could see the monolithic and dark shape of the Black Walls of Volantis, and he knew from his maester's lessons and from talk in all the places that he and his sister had visited in their exile that there were no greater fortifications in the world, for the Black Walls were made in the old Valyrian way, with the same techniques that had created
Dragonstone and done so without ever once leaving the telltale marks of a mason's tools, the entire fortress being one single piece of stonework...and the same was true of the Black Walls of Volantis, the massive battlements that were two hundred feet in height and closer to cliffs than walls and whose surface could not be marred by anything in the known world, not with steel and not with diamond. Not even Valyrian steel could scratch the surface, metal and stone alike made in a manner that had died with the Doom, and behind the invincible fortifications he could see the tops of towers made in the same manner, temples and palaces and a hundred other things that were the oldest buildings in the city, the heart around which the rest had grown...and though the buildings outside the Black Walls were nowhere near as grand as those within, they were a dozen times better than the squalid and stinking hovels that made up much of King's Landing, made of good stone and with roofs made of orange tiles baked from clay taken from the banks of the Rhoyne and with what could only be a grand temple to the Lord of Light, made with an assortment of bricks that made the building change color from bottom to top just as a flame might, with an opening in its dome shaped ceiling so as to allow the light of the sun through in day and to let the smoke of their nightfires out in the evening. On the west side of the Rhoyne the youngest and poorest parts of the city could be found, a maze of inns and houses and workshops and brothels and warehouses and docks and bakeries and everything else that a city needed to live and work and laugh, surrounded by several rings of walls and turrets and lesser fortresses and guard barracks, strong and modern defenses that were clearly in good condition, but were not even the shadow of the Black Walls that had been erected in the earliest days of the city's history, when it was nothing more than a fortress with which to watch the best passages into the Land of the Long Summer and to keep the Rhoynar from sailing down their river without risk.

And there in the midst of the city was the river itself, splitting the great city in twain, but just as how old Valyria had never been one to shy away from a challenge, whether it be a military one or an engineering one, the Volantenes had done the same and built a massive bridge of black stone meant to imitate the unbreakable material of the Black Walls, called the Long Bridge. It was immense, crossing a river five times the width of the Blackwater Rush, and doing so with the strength to hold a town's worth of structures on its back, all shops and stores and other places of commerce, ranging from the humblest shoemaker to goldsmiths so skilled as to be fit for the custom of any king or queen. From the great arch that was the bridge's shape, however, came the appearance of hanging corpses, dangling freely from the bridge's edges as a warning to other murderers and rapists and pirates, and beneath them passed an unending torrent of ships both for commerce and for battle, watched over by twin winch towers on either side of the bridge, the driving place for a chain lying unseen beneath the waters below, and as if to add emphasis, there were two more great galleys besides, scorpions forever trained upon the vessels that passed to and from their city.

Just seeing it all made Viserys know that what Tygett had said was right - if there was ever a place in the entire world that could help him to win back his throne, this was it. He only hoped that they would be willing, for if they would not help him and his sister...then he had little idea of what else to do, but to perhaps try and sell the dragon eggs so as to be able to hire the Golden Company and an army of sellswords with which to try and take back his kingdoms, with the hope that the loyal lords of his kingdom would rise for him. But what reason would they have to turn him down? He was the rightful king of Westeros, the one for whom many lords would rise to see him returned to the Iron Throne, and further still he could promise the Old Blood lands in Westeros to replace the traitors who had turned against him, giving them real power again, power that they had not had since the Century of Blood.

And so he turned to his sister, and smiled, hopeful. "See, sweet sister? Volantis is as mighty as I always told you. They will help us take back our throne. You'll see Westeros soon."

"And the dragonskulls," his sister added as the merchant cog passed beneath the bridge, coming to a
halt on the edge of the long quay.

He laughed, and then there was a shout from the shore.

"Greetings!" came the voice of a well dressed man, silver hair interspersed with brown and with eyes that carried only a hint of Valyrian heritage, behind which were a pair of the strangest animals that Viserys had ever seen, large pale white things bigger than bulls with great ears, a pair of stubby little tusks and a long, trumpeting nose, fastened to large ornate carriages. "I am Ilario, and I see travellers from distant lands! Do any of you need a guide, perhaps? I have dwarf elephants and fine hathays for you to travel in!"

"Oh good," Tygett sighed. "The vultures are here. Men like him make their fortune off travellers from Westeros who don't know any better."

"Is there any alternative?" Viserys asked. "We have belongings that need to be brought, and you cannot carry them and guard at the same time."

"Aye, the king's right," Brandon said to Tygett with a shrug. "You've been here before. Show them some of your famous Lannister charm and lead the way."

"Fine," Tygett said with another and longer sigh. "But if this goes wrong I did not suggest this plan."

"And I shall not hold you to it, ser," Viserys smiled, stepping aside so that Tygett may descend the steps.

"We have need of transportation," Tygett said, marching down the gangplank and onto the quay. "Four passengers, with baggage."

"And where do you wish to go? A tour of the city, perhaps?" Ilario offered, trying to tempt the Lannister knight. "A visit to the Temple of the Lord of Light, maybe? Or a visit to the Dreaming Dragon, the pleasure house founded by a daughter of Jaehaerys the Wise himself? Her descendents still ply the "trade" if you wish to -"

"We can give you the destination once we get started," Tygett said, cutting the travelmaster off. "But first, we need to know the price."

"A...small issue," Ilario said then, smiling. "Westerosi gold has little value here, but I can easily arrange to have it exchanged for Volantene honors. One dragon for ten honors is fitting."

"And there it is," Brandon sighed.

"As a Lannister, I know quite a bit about gold," Tygett said, crossing his arms. "And I also know that three silver stags makes an honor since you make no other kind of coin. This isn't my first visit to Volantis, you see. And my companions and I have a meeting with the Old Blood that we are direly late for."

"The...the Old Blood?" Ilario said quietly and with obvious disconcert. "They do not take kindly to being interrupted by anyone, not least -"

"A half-born like you," Tygett said. "Now, shall I tell them that we are late because our hathay driver asked too many questions, or should I say that he hurried us there as quickly as he could."
"Of course, of course," Ilario said, changing the tone of his voice to one that was perhaps not quite as enthusiastic as it had been before. "Four passengers and luggage. Free of charge, as any friend of the Old Blood deserves."

"Thank you," Tygett said, waving over Viserys and the others. "Our things are on the first deck in the guest cabin."

Ilario nodded deeply and bowed twice, and then gave commands to a waiting group of men, either slaves or freeborn, Viserys could not tell which, who then quickly came aboard and began offloading the trunks that they had been given by the Pentoshi magister, never once taking an opportunity to open them and never once fumbling with any, carrying them out to the back of their hathay and placing them within a metal cage, sealed with a lock that only the hathay's driver could open and only when they had reached their destination, to protect the belongings within from theft. Viserys smiled at it all, watching carefully as it took two grown men to put the chest that contained the dragon eggs into the rear of the hathay, but the dwarf elephant, a pale creature the color of fresh fallen snow, was utterly unphased by the added weight of so much luggage. Proceeding down the steps and down the ramp himself, stepping onto Volantene territory for the first time, Viserys smiled as the warm winds blew through his silver hair and past his cheeks, feeling truly comfortable for the first time since he had left Dragonstone all those years before, and he escorted his lady wife down the ramp as well, taking her hand to make sure she would not slip or fall due to whatever disorientation she might have left from their voyage before helping her into the hathay's lavish interior, a place of comfortable padded seats beneath sheets of dark violet velvet and wood slat windows that could be opened or closed at will by those within, whilst a small round hole in the ceiling provided clear light for the little table that sat in the center of the hathay, atop of which was a large round bowl of apples and oranges and peaches and plums and even a bundle of grapes, all given to the passenger freely.

He followed her in, sitting alongside his beloved sister, and then came Brandon on the other side of the table and then Tygett besides him, and then and only then did the coachman, one of Ilario's men, close the door and climb onto the front of the hathay, saying a soft word to the dwarf elephant that honked with a blow of its trumpet nose in answer before setting off at a speed not much swifter than walking, starting them on their journey through the city's busy streets, past other hathays and their own white elephants and their own honking, the noise coming through the window slats along with all the talking and clattering and laughing and haggling of city life.

"...what about Bronn..?" his sister said, looking around the hathay only to see no room for the sellsword. "He's still on the ship."

"We can make do without him," Viserys smiled, comforting his concerned sister. "I would think him a spy, too."

"You as well?" Tygett said, slumping back into the seat, taking a grape between armored fingers and plucking it from the bunch. "I thought for a moment whether it would be better to toss him in the Rhoyne rather than leave him. He's a spy, for certain, for there's not a sellsword in the world who would find an exile king and swear to serve him, no matter who they might be. Whose man he is, though...I'm less sure. Not my brother's, for sure, else he would have stabbed me in the back the moment I first turned around."

"The Usurper has always had spies following us," Viserys sighed. "He must have surely been one of his."

"I am less sure about that than you, my king," Tygett said, throwing the grape into his mouth as he did. "If he was, he would have tried to kill you both already. He hadn't."
"He wouldn't have been able to do it, either," Brandon smiled, looking out the wooden window to see his eagle following their path in the skies above. "Tygett here is one of the best swords house Lannister ever had."

"I think you would find that to be Brightroar," Tygett answered with a Lannister's wit, making the Northman laugh. "In any case, he won't be able to find us here once we're past the Black Walls. No one could."

"Then we will finally have a chance to rest," Viserys said, smiling.

"Exactly so, but only if the Old Blood allow you within the Black Walls," Tygett answered at last. "The Volantenes make use of slave guards to help police the slaves themselves, but the Black Walls aren't guarded by slaves but by freeborn soldiers, well trained, well equipped and fanatically loyal the lot of them. They won't let you through unless they think you should be inside and have true business with the Old Blood."

"They won't bar my entry, surely?" Viserys asked, surprised. "I am the rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms, and the Old Blood are kin to Targaryens by both coming from Old Valyria."

"Aye, you are, but the Volantenes have their own plans, whatever they might be," Brandon reasoned. "That fleet of theirs is proof enough of that."

"Then what should I say, for them to let me in?" Viserys asked, looking to his knights.

"Be honest about why you are here," Tygett said. "Not too honest. But honest."

"Flattery might work," Brandon shrugged. "It usually does in Essos."

Viserys looked to his wife, then, saying nothing and yet saying everything in the silence.

"Maybe you could make yourself of use to them, so that they have a reason to let you in?" Daenerys suggested quietly. "They're less likely to ignore us if they think they have some use for us."

"So, I should flatter them, offer my services to them and yet not be too honest about why I am here," Viserys sighed. "The court of the Red Keep was less convoluted than that, and everyone was plotting about something there."

"Your sister is right," Tygett agreed. "If the Volantenes think you could help them with whatever it is they have planned, then mayhaps you could get an invitation behind the Black Walls. If that fails..."

Tygett went quiet, then, and Viserys looked to his knight.

"I...do have a friend within who might be able to let us in. I was here for quite a while, and had more than a few chances to meet with the Old Blood myself. Most were curious as to why a Lannister of Casterly Rock was here in Essos," Tygett explained with a sigh. "More were wondering if I was looking for my brother Gerion, wherever it is he's gone. Either way, I know someone who might be able to let us in, but they should be our last resort."

"Then I will hope we do not have to speak with them," Viserys said, feeling a clunk beneath his feet as he looked out the window to his right and saw the stores of the bridge as they passed by; there were merchants selling everything that one could find beneath the sun and the moon, everything
from spices to slaves to weapons to clothing to wine to ancient heirlooms of the Freehold and the Ghiscari and the Rhoynar and every other civilization that had stood where the Freehold once had, and even a book merchant, all surrounded by throngs of freeborn men and women of all classes, but more and more of the rich and the powerful could be seen as they grew closer and closer to the. "It won't be long before we are there."

"Your grace, there is one thing you need to remember whilst you are here," Tygett said. "The Volantenes love their Freehold. They will not help you to reclaim your throne if you ever speak ill of it."

"Then I shall not speak ill of it, and why would I?" Viserys asked. "It has served them well enough."

"Exactly what you should tell to them," Tygett smiled.

Then there was another clunk as the hathay rolled over the bump in the path that was the end of the bridge, proceeding further into the oldest part of the city...and Viserys couldn't help but feel his nerves grow uneasy, concerned that he could have salvation snatched away at the very last moment, when they were so close, so close, to having an ally strong enough for them to have a real and fighting chance of taking back their homeland. This was their last chance, he knew, for the other cities had little interest in his hopes and aspirations and claims, and the Golden Company had little love for Targaryens even with the death of the last Blackfyre decades before. Should they be turned away now, there was only uncertainty ahead, and the real threat that he and his wife would be the last of the Targaryens, no matter how unjust such a thing might be. He took a grape of his own, peeling the skin off with anxious fingernails as he looked through the window, watching as the great gate of the Black Walls, a massive arching fortification, came ever closer, looming over them like a vast monster, and before it were no more than a handful of guards. Viserys ate the grape, swallowing without chewing, and then the hathay came to a final stop, the elephant honking for a moment before falling silent, no more than fifteen feet from the gate, the driver hurriedly opening the door and allowing Viserys to step out, as he did, followed by Tygett and Brandon and his sister wife, all standing before the great gate.

And quickly, one of the guards rode forth, mounted upon a black horse, armored in scales painted purple and gold and with a violet breastplate that bore the city's crest on its surface, all half concealed beneath a tiger's pelt that was fastened with a golden brooch shaped like a tiger's head. Unlike the others that he had seen at sea, his helm was a cone, his face hidden behind a mask of metal shaped like the face of some twisted nightmare but for eyes of pale lavender. On his left arm was fastened a round shield bearing the fourteen sided star of the old Valyrian gods, to go with the sword of Valyrian steel in easy reach next to his right hand...

...and not far from it was a dragonbone bow, long and curved twice in stark contrast to the great longbows of the Seven Kingdoms, its handgrip carved with an image of Balerion, the huntress god of the old Freehold and the namesake from which the greatest of the Targaryen dragons had taken its name, and on the same side as his shield arm was a full quiver.

"Rytsas, Targārio raqiros," the guard said with perfect High Valyrian, placing his hands over his chest, fingers splayed, to make the symbol of the dragon before offering a bow, one that Viserys returned before starting in the Common Tongue. "I am Rhaegon Muhaerys, captain of this gate. What brings you to our fair city?"

"I would like to pass through the Black Walls, so that I might speak with the Old Blood of Volantis and seek their aid in reclaiming my rightful throne," Viserys said, proud but with a polite deference. "May I do so?"
"Perhaps," the guard answered, his words a challenge. "For what reason should the Old Blood help you?"

"The Targaryens have long been friends of Volantis," Viserys answered. "My father, King Aerys, had hoped that my brother Rhaegar's bride would hail from this city. We would be allies were it so, and the Targaryens of Dragonstone have long been friends of the people of Volantis."

"And enemies just as often," the guard said coldly. "It was your forefather, Aegon the Conqueror, who broke our city's might and left us weak. It has taken centuries to recover from his blow. Centuries, when we would have otherwise restored the Freehold."

"And it was also us who helped you to rise once more after breaking the might of the Three Daughters," Viserys replied. "House Targaryen and the Old Blood are cousins. We might feud, as cousins do, but when we need one another's aid we have never once turned you down. Will you not do the same for us?"

Rhaegon was quiet, then, and a minute passed in grim silence, and for a moment Viserys thought he might have ruined everything with his words, squandered the future of all Targaryens with a rash reply or with a forgotten etiquette.

Then, with a look towards Rhaegon's eyes, Viserys knew he was smiling.

"Very well," came the answer at last. "You are welcome, Targārio, as any who might trace their lineage to the Lords Freeholder are. Your passage was never in question, only your reasoning to do so."

"Thank you," Viserys smiled. "I will be sure to remember you when I claim my throne."

"I thank you for the generous offer, but duty is my reward," came the Muhaerys' answer. "I need to know only one more thing - with whom shall you be staying? You must surely have some friend who might be notified of your arrival?"

Viserys was quiet, then.

"As much as I might wish it, I cannot allow you into the city should you not have someone with which to stay as a guest," Rhaegon then said, grimly. "Though perhaps you could make arrangements to visit -"

"Laena Lohaeris," Tygett said then, stepping forward.

And then Rhaegon looked to him, and Viserys knew in an instant that the two men had met before.

"Oh. It is you. The Lannister. Did you not learn the price of making trouble in our walls before? Was the warning unclear?"

"Apparently not," Tygett said. "But you know as well as I that I am a friend of Laena's."

"Very well, but I doubt the Triarchs shall be so generous this time if you make trouble once more," Rhaegon answered as he raised his right hand and snapped his fingers. "The warning will not be a warning this time."
"What has he done?" Viserys asked, confused, as the gate began to open.

"He knows what he did," Rhaegon answered, saying nothing more before pointing towards the opening gate, one of the guards turning over a great hour glass that began trickling sand. "Pass through. The gates will be open for one hour, no longer, so make your passage now whilst you have time. Your hathay shall be allowed passage so that you might bring your belongings. The Lannister knows where you wish to go. Now go, the sooner he is out of my sight, the sooner my day might improve."

Viserys looked to Tygett, stunned and wondering,

"It's...complicated, your grace," the Lannister answered, starting to walk towards the gate, the hathay close behind as soon as the driver urged the pale beast to move again. "We best hurry. Laena's manse is close to the entrance, so we will not need to walk far."

"Then we best be going," Viserys said. "I am sure you will have time to explain everything."

"Oh, he will," Rhaegon murmured, returning to his guard post.

"At dinner," Tygett said quickly as Brandon followed, escorting their queen. "Then I'll tell you everything."

"Fair enough," Viserys said, walking to his sister-wife's side, taking her arm in his as they passed through the gate...

...only to see a great tunnel that lead off at a diagonal from the main gate, the passage way lit by dozens of braziers placed inside alcoves in the walls just beneath three floors worth of arrow slits, polished mirrors behind shining their light into the tunnel...and above, portcullises, one after another, like the fangs of a monster ever threatening to come down. He followed Tygett, trusting in his lead, and they walked down the tunnel only for it to suddenly snap back towards its previous path, a great V shaped tunnel that would render the gatehouse impossible to storm by even the greatest army in the world, with seven gates in total on each side, making for fourteen, the holiest number for the Valyrians and the same number that there were Flames in the Land of the Long Summer. Passing through, he felt his sister's disoriented steps, still sick and tired from the long voyage, and he did everything he could to keep her upright, letting her put all her weight on him to make sure that she would not fall. And so they went, through the tunnel...

...and when they reached the opposite side of the entrance, he saw paradise.

Everywhere his eyes fell, he saw perfection, in the form of the perfectly straight and exactly measured roads to the beautiful, golden domes of the palaces and temples and meeting places and the pavilions of gardens, all bearing fourteen lines that expanded out from the middle, so that viewed from above it would look a field of the Valyrian's most holiest of symbols. There was no dirt or grime in the streets, no, nor even the first trace of rubbish, for a complex series of sewers and plumbing kept such filth out of the gutters that contained only leaves and other such things, and there were gardens everywhere, to break up the fields of black and gold that were before him, filled with brightly colored flowers that were once found in the Land of the Long Summer in the days before the doom, beautiful things of red and blue and gold and yellow and green, mixed with well trimmed fruit trees flowering in the warm summer air...and the largest buildings of all, those of the wealthiest people within this city-within-a-city, had open topped towers like those of Valyria of old, great spires which emerged just above the Black Walls and allowed the ones at their summit to look out and see the world beyond their protective barricade, and in the center of it all was a great fortress turned
palace, the original heart of Volantis and where the old garrison that had stood on guard, forever watching the waters of the Rhoyne, had slept and ate and made ready for war, a castle that bore all the familiar draconic features of Dragonstone and had the same style of tower and even the same hue of stone, and just looking at it filled him with a rush of warmth and nostalgia.

"Viserys..." his sister whispered. "Is...is this what home is like?"

"This is what Dragonstone looks like, sweet sister," he said with a smile, pointing towards the fortress heart. "That is what it looks like."

His sister looked towards it...and smiled, ever so slightly.

"Its beautiful."

He felt as though he was home, at long last. He saw people, men and women who were silver haired and violet eyed like him, walking and talking with one another in the streets, happy and utterly without worry, laughing and peaceful in the quiet and safe confines of the Black Walls, where the only sound was that of likeminded friends and the soft sound of the winds rustling through tree leaves and blades of grass alike. This was how he wished his life could be, utterly without the need to worry about finding food or water to nourish him and his sister or a place for them to stay at night, without the risk of being found and gutted by the Usurper's blades, without needing to worry about being rejected by magister and mercenary captain alike no matter how much he might offer them to take up his cause, all that and so much more, utterly carefree.

At last, after so many years of running, he found a place that felt like home.

"Come along now, your grace," Tygett smiled, taking off his helmet and throwing his hair to the side, long locks of Lannister gold flowing freely. "Laena will be sitting down for dinner in but a few hours, so she will need to know she has guests if we're going to have something to eat, so we best hurry."

"Come, wife, it seems we have a feast to attend," Viserys laughed with his sister, the two walking together as the hathay followed them just as they followed Tygett, Brandon whistling cheerfully as his eagle circled overhead.

Tygett led them down the road and then left, heading down another street before turning right, clearly knowing the exact way by memory alone, and there it was, a small but well built manse of two floors, a square building but one with a large dome atop in the middle, above what was surely the main bedroom or perhaps a dining room of some kind, he couldn't be sure without seeing the inside, but there was a balcony attached to the floor that was supported over the entry way by great columns of perfect black stone, all of it built well and all of it furnished well too, and that was good enough for Viserys.

And on the balcony was a beautiful woman dressed in violet whose silver hair was streaked with gold, just as Elaena Targaryen's had been a century before, and she looked down in surprise at their approach, staring at -

"Tygg!" she shouted in surprise.

"Hello, Laena!" the Lannister shouted back. "I've brought guests!"

Laena moved quickly, rushing back inside, and Viserys smiled as they ascended the steps and
stepped beneath the balcony, its bricks providing a cool respite from the baking noon sun, standing before a great door of dark ebonwood. He heard the clatter of a lock and the shifting of a bolt, and then the door opened, and Laena stood before them, in the doorway of a lavishly decorated hall, a place like that of a castle writ small, with a long table of a dozen seats on either side and something not-quite-like a throne at the very end with a hearth behind it flanked by staircases that led to the upper floors of the manse, and a tiger's pelt on the floor, long and proud and bringing precious color to the room.

Then Laena stepped forth, and gave Tygett a kiss.

"You said you would come back," she smiled.

"I told you I would," the Lannister answered, returning her smile.

Then there was the crack of Laena's backhand striking him round the cheek, a blow that caught the veteran knight by surprise and sent him reeling, clutching at his cheek.

"What in the Seven's name was that for?"

"For leaving," Laena said with crossed arms. "And for taking so long."

"I told you I would come back when I could," Tygett confessed, helpless.

"You have been gone for four years," Laena snapped. "And not once did I hear a message from you saying whether you were still alive or not. For all I knew, you could have been dead!"

"Well, as you can see, I am not," Tygett said. "I am alive and well. And I have a surprise."

"Fourteen have mercy," the Valyrian woman sighed. "This best not be another one of your schemes to take back Casterly-"

"No, no, no scheming, nothing," Tygett said with an innocent look on his face before turning towards his king and queen. "This is Viserys and Daenerys, of the House Targaryen. Rightful king and queen of the Seven Kingdoms. They are here to speak to the Triarchs and the Freeholders about finding support for reclaiming their throne."

Then he looked back to the Valyrian woman, smiling. "I was hoping you wouldn't mind giving us shelter till we can meet them...? For old time's sake?"

Laena stared at him, hard...and then she looked to Viserys and Daenerys and sighed before looking back to Tygett. "...why I can never say no to you, Tygg, I'll never know. Come in. My home is your home."

And with that, she stood aside, and Tygett smiled as he led the way once again, entering the Volantene woman's home with Viserys and Daenerys not far behind, followed by Brandon who gave her an appreciative nod before stepping in last and allowing her to close the door behind her, and Viserys looked around as she did. The manse was small, that may have certainly been so, but it was spectacularly comfortable, homely in a way that Ilyrio's manse in Pentos had not been. It had a heart, a soul, and Viserys was not sure why; was it because of the warm but moist air reminding him so much of Dragonstone and the bright light outside of King's Landing, or was it because there was no formalities here, no incessant flattering and promising and everything else that he had been showered in whenever he had visited a magister's manse only to be turned out onto the street at
evening's end, or was it simply the feeling of being safe, for the first time in so long?

He didn't know, but he prayed it would never go.

"Muña?" came the voice of a child from the stairwell calling for his mother with concern, a young boy peering at them all from around the wall, his hair more golden than not but his eyes still violet.

"Well, Tygg, I have a surprise for you as well," Laena said quietly, looking around in case anyone was listening in. "Tygaeris! Come here."

And with that, the little boy ran down the steps and stood before his mother, dressed in purple clothes like his mother.

"This is your father," she said, turning to Tygett, who looked at the child and then to Laena in disbelief. "And this is your son."

Viserys looked to his sister with a knowing smile, and she barely suppressed a laugh. Brandon shook his head, utterly unsurprised.

"And whilst you two get acquainted with one another, I will see to our guests, though I expect Brandon will want to stay with you and see everything for himself," Laena smiled.

"You know me too well, my lady," Brandon said with a bow as father and son looked at one another, confused as to where to start.

"As for you two," Laena said, looking at Viserys and Daenerys at last. "I know little enough about the both of you, and if I was wise I probably wouldn't trust you simply because you're with Tygg, but...dinner will give us a chance to talk, I hope?"

"Of course, but we will need a moment to settle in," Viserys said, grateful for her hospitality. "Thank you for taking us in."

"At least someone remembered their courtesy," Laena said, glaring at Tygett before looking back towards Viserys and his sister. "Please, follow me. I have a spare bedchamber for the both of you upstairs, if you would like to get some rest before dinner...?"

"Thank you," Daenerys smiled...before wincing and rubbing her middle again, uneasy. "I'm sorry...the journey's been long. I think it best if I lie down for a little while."

"Then follow me," Laena said, leaving a stunned Tygett and a mildly amused Brandon behind in the dining hall, the Lannister at a loss for words as to what to say to his young namesake...

...and Viserys happily followed with his sister at his side, content, nearly as eager as his sister to rest in a comfortable bed again after so long a journey, and Laena led them to a large and comfortable bedchamber on the east wall, a place with a large bed covered in violet blankets and big enough for the both of them to share, its own attached privy chamber and more wardrobes and closets and chests than they had possessions for. But before he could thank her, his sister, weary, simply walked over to the bed and rolled onto its surface, asleep in an instant.

"That was sudden," Laena said with surprise. "How long have you been travelling, for her to be tired so?"
"A month, mayhaps a month and a half," Viserys sighed. "We were wed before starting out, and we have done nothing but sail and travel since then, and she's been sick most of the journey."

"Sick? Truly?" Laena asked. "Did she feel any better when the ship was travelling slowly, or at night, mayhaps?"

"She rarely felt better at all," Viserys answered as best as he could. "She's been sick in the mornings for the most part, but she usually strengthened up through the day only to feel worse again as we pick up speed."

"And you were married before setting out?" Laena asked. "And...bedded?"

Viserys looked at her with as much confusion as suspicion.

"Sorry for asking," Laena excused herself, embarrassed by her prying questions. "I just hate mysteries, and I thought I might have figured out what was wrong with her to make her so tired and ill."

"What?" Viserys asked quietly, willing to know of anything that might affect his sweet sister's health.

"Have you ever thought that she might simply be pregnant?"

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End of Part 20!

Chapter End Notes

I think this was one of my favorite parts to write so far, and I really, really hope that you guys loved reading it as much as I did writing it :)

Now, as I've mentioned before, I typically write five parts for a story and then go onto the next story and write five parts, but I'm actually abandoning that method in favor of another that should guarantee a more consistent stream of parts, because the sheer length of the gap between part 15 and part 16 was actually rather disorientating for me, since I finished off working on one story only to come back to this and have little idea of where I had left off, but I've seen caught back up on the momentum and I *know* where we were, where we are and where we are heading and I've gotten back into the driver's seat for the characters, so the quality is once again back to where it should be...and in order to prevent such a massive gap again, I've decided that I'm going to switch stories with every part - so instead of having five parts, you get one, but the gap between these parts is going to be quite fast, since it doesn't take me that long to finish a story and should hopefully keep me in the zone for every story simultaneously.

And now with that said, onto the summary! :D

This part picks up where the last Viserys part left off, with the passage of a couple of days that saw the Targaryens buy passage on a transport ship from Pentos to Volantis and making their way there through the various ports, picking up supplies, etc, but we
start right with the good stuff and at the final leg of the journey - I don't really need to say all that much about Viserys, since I mentioned in the last Targaryen PoV that he is quite a bit different from his canonical appearance due to differences in how his exile went; he's like a young version of Aerys rather than like Aerys after Duskendale, and this main difference is the result of a combination of a number of various factors including but not limited to having enough money to not need to sell Rhaella's crown, which he passed over to Daenerys during their wedding night. Since then, the two have bonded quite a bit, and Daenerys has started the process of coming out of her shell with her the encouragements of her new husband, who hopes to have a marriage the same way that he remembers the marriage of his own parents being - Rhaella, having shielded Viserys from all the bad sides of their father, has caused Viserys to have a very idealized idea of what a king and a queen should be like, but he wants to live up to those ideals and have a long and happy marriage with his sister wife, as well as hopefully having lots of cute children...

...and the first of those children is already on the way, as revealed by the last line of the part above.

And on an equally important basis to Daenerys' pregnancy, we have the reveal of Volantis for the first time in this story, the homeland of Horrono Vaenyris, and this was the section of the story that I enjoyed writing the most, from the appearance of their fleet in the Summer Sea to that first moment we see the city emerge over the horizon to the end of the part. Volantis has grown in strength greatly over the previous years, and this is primarily the result of many factors that I have covered before, but will cover again here - the growth of the North and its increased wealth has, as a knock on effect, raised the wealth of all of the Seven Kingdoms by quite a bit, with Dorne being the least affected due to being on the opposite side of the realm from the North and with changes radiating outwards from Winterfell, meaning that the Westerosi realms are richer and thus have more money to spend on foreign imported luxuries whilst the canal has allowed the great markets of Westeros to be more closely connected with the Free Cities, bonds that were strengthened even more so by the use of Essosi knowledge in the final phase of its construction in the form of making the great locks needed for it to function as anything more than the world's largest manmade moat.

All this has been pushing the Free Cities upwards as well due to the increased number of customers for their goods...but Volantis has been in a rather special position in that some of the goods they produce are also produced in Westeros in the form of the Dornish, and with the North and the Westerlands on bad relations with the southernmost of the Westerosi realms because of such things as Eddard's journey through Dorne and the massacre of Rhaegar's children, which means that trade between them is...not exactly bustling. Mostly because the Lannisters don't want to risk having their traders captured in Dorne and tortured to death or anything of the sort.

And if you want to know more about Volantis, check out the comments below, since I've used up the character count for this note section :p
Bran III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

****

Winterfell

Bran stood in silence as he turned and turned and turned and looked and looked and saw nothing, only an unending darkness that passed from him to the horizon, a great abyss devoid of sights and sounds and smells and all the other sensations, with the sky above as utterly devoid of sun and stars as the void beneath his feet was of grass or stone or anything that his eyes could discern from the rest around him. Even the air felt like nothingness upon his cheeks, neither cold nor warm nor still nor moving, as utterly devoid of anything as the rest of the realm around him.

"...hello...?" he tried to shout, his voice leaving his throat as no more than a whisper, yet echoing across the distance like the fiercest cry.

There was no answer. It felt as if he had never spoken at all.

And so he turned again, thoughtlessly, only this time he saw one of the Green Men of his family's faith and who tended to the wierwood trees with bronze sickles and their leaf colored robes, faces forever concealed by masks of pale wierwood, and besides him was another man crumpled over on his knees, grey of hair and clutching at a deep and bloody wound in his middle, a terrible cut that wepted steaming crimson and one that had made him deathly pale and one that even Bran knew to be beyond the abilities of any maester, even their wise and clever Luwin.

"...in the name of the gods, I do that which I have been commanded," the Green Man spoke, raising a bloody sickle and slashing the fallen one's back, an arc of blood spraying through the air and splashing on the young Stark's face and in his open mouth, flooding his tongue with the sweetness of sap, then doing it again, again, again, again, every hit striking flesh with the sound of an axe striking wood.

"Bran," said the pained one, looking up to see the Stark, to meet his eyes with his own red, extending hands that were not covering a wound, but a bird, a raven drenched in blood. "...forgive me."

"Enough," said the Green Man, his voice hard like iron and cold like ice, grabbing the fallen one by the hair, placing the bronze sickle against his throat before raising it again for the final strike.

In that moment, the man let go of the raven, and it flew towards Brandon just as his head left his body. Brandon raised an arm to protect himself, to shield himself from its deadly claws, and then there came the song of a bow and the screech of a bird and the thump of it striking the ground and the fluttering of dying wings, and Bran opened his eyes again to see another of the Green Men, picking up the dying bird and driving the arrow deeper into its heart, through the front and out the back, holding it in place...till at last the bird fell still and lived no more.

Only then did the Green Man let go, and only then did the raven fall to the ground, dead and lifeless.
And only then did the Green Man look to Bran himself, taking notice of his presence for the first time, the other vanished.

"Fear not the raven, he will bother you no longer," came soft words that somehow filled Bran with relief, even though he knew them not. "His time is done."

"...who...who are you?" Brandon asked.

And at that, the Green Man seemed to smile, even if the Stark could not see the face behind the mask. "A friend."

The Green Man crouched down to Brandon's height, setting bow aside and extending a hand that Brandon took with tentative, uneasy movements. The Green Man pulled him into a fatherly embrace, holding him with comforting arms that seemed to make all the unease of his strange surroundings and the strange raven disappear, and he could not help but to smile, but to relax.

Then he realized their arms and their hands and even their breath was cold, an unearthly cold that chilled him to the heart through all his clothes and filled his heart with a growing dread, even if he knew not why, the way a mouse must surely feel when it was being stalked by a silent tom. But knights shouldn't be afraid, and he wanted to be a knight, and so he looked to them, and in the Green Man's place was a woman who felt like ice, and who looked towards him with skin as pale as milk and a gentle smile and eyes like bright blue stars, beautiful and deep and yet so terribly, terribly wrong, for in those depths he saw a cold and frozen death, his death, the death of all who had warmth within their veins rather than ice, and the skin sloughed from her cheeks in a tide of stinking rot to reveal bones that gleamed with ice and rubies of frozen blood and fingers narrowing to deadly claws and he screamed and cried and tried to run in utter terror from the ice woman and shouted and struggled as he felt her claws digging into him and felt a rough wetness on his cheeks and nose and opened his eyes to see his end and saw...

...his direwolf pup, looking at him with worry before licking his face again with a soft whine that made the fear that had filled him so utterly a moment before melt away into nothingness, banished by the realization that it was just a dream and nothing more, that he was still in his home of Winterfell with his mother and father and brothers and sisters but a few minutes from his door and that there was no black void looming all around, but his bedchamber, warm and comfortable and with the light of morning peeking through the crack in the window shutters like a sword, so bright as to make his tired eyes ache to see. The pup licked his cheek again, still concerned for him, and Bran laughed, shying away from the pup as he pulled out hands tangled in his blankets and sheets and picked the young wolf up before setting him down at the side of his bed.

"How did you get here?" he asked, smiling as Winter, the first of the direwolves to have a name, panted with excitement as his master rose from his bed with a yawn and a stretch.

"Bran?" came the tired voice of his brother Robb, followed with a knock on the door. "Is everything alright in there?"

"I'm fine," he shouted loudly, embarrassed to have been heard during what was surely but a nightmare and nothing more. Surely. "Winter just woke me up, is all."

"Aye, well, its time to break our fast anyway," a weary Jon added. "We'll see you there."

"Alright," he answered, climbing out from beneath his blankets, the feeling on his skin of the cosy warmth being replaced by the soft chill of the outside world banishing away whatever tiredness
remained inside of him...and leaving his mind clear at last as he looked to the door and saw it shut entirely before looking to the shutters again and back to Winter, sat happily at his side.

"You were in here last night, weren't you?"

Then he laughed, and walked over to his set of drawers, a thing that was twice as wide as it was tall so as to be easy for even a child to be able to open, one of nearly a hundred that Winterfell had stowed away in the cellars for young children of Winterfell and of their vassals alike, each kept forever in case it might ever be needed again, even if only as firewood for when the winters grew too bitter and too long. He rummaged through them, one by one, and dressed himself in clothes that were tougher and harder wearing than the norm, knowing that today was the day they usually did their arms practice, and knowing that even the slimmest doublet couldn't fit beneath armor and would cause one to become far too hot and that taking it off would have been a waste of time that could have been spent putting on his armor, or practicing his sword skills or his bowmanship or his riding or his warging or hawking or a thousand other things that were a better use of his time...and much, much more fun. He moved, stretching his arms by raising his hands over his head and moving them in a smooth circle down and around to make sure that they fitted him well, as southern knights always did before going into battle so as to ensure that their plate was properly fitted and allowed them to move freely, before finally doing as his mother would have wished and combing his auburn hair right so that neither the royals or anyone else might see it wild and messy from bed.

Then he walked over to the door, his direwolf wandering over as he did without him even needing to say but a single word, and undid the little bronze latch that kept it closed through the night before pulling it open and heading out onto an empty hall, the torches already burning and already filling the hall with a growing warmth greater than that of the hot water piped through the walls, and before he could anything more, Winter eagerly sniffed the air, knowing of the sausages and bacon and eggs and everything else that was being cooked a few floors beneath his feet, starting off towards the stairs on his own before scratching on the door with excitement. Brandon laughed again, and hurried to his pup's side, opening the door and letting the pup run out onto the staircase, the young Stark following close behind, watching as the little silver wolf ran down the first ten steps only to tumble on the ninth in his haste and roll onto the tenth with a surprised yelp, Bran afraid for but a heartbeat before the wolf was upright once more and shaking its head in confusion and continuing down the steps a little more slowly than before, but Bran followed as he had before, watching and smiling as the empty stairwell began to fill with others, wards of Winterfell older and younger than he and guests from the southern realms, even laughing when he saw Winter pawing at the door that led to the hall behind the great hall, where King Robert's only daughter and his youngest son looked at him with amazement and genuine curiosity that even their protector, the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, Ser Barristan Selmy himself, seemed to mirror, if perhaps at only a modest level more befitting a knight of such legendary fame.

"He's so fluffy," Tommen said with a voice filled with wonder, crouching down to look at Winter more closely, the young direwolf basking in the attention that they royals gave him. "Is he a wolf?"

"He's a direwolf," Bran said with a smile as he walked over. "He's still a pup, though."

"Are they all so...furry?" Myrcella asked, reaching out with a tentative hand towards the little direwolf, ...only for Winter to stretch his way out to her hand and lick her fingers, making the princess laugh.

"Maester Luwin says so," he answered as Winter patted over to his side. "He said its because of how much snow there is north of the Wall, so their mother's milk helps them grow a thicker coat."
"Their mother is here?" Myrcella asked, almost stunned. "Truly?"

"She is, but mother has been keeping her in the godswood so she can rest," Bran answered honestly as he opened the door and headed out to the hall, the prince and princess at his side and many of the wards of Winterfell behind. "Winter is supposed to be with her, but he managed to get out."

"Is she as big as they say she is?" the prince asked as his sister looked on, walking alongside the two as the Lord Commander followed. "Can we see her?"

"The direwolves of the Starks of Winterfell were said to be as large as ponies, my prince, and there were known to rip the arms from men gown whilst trying to play with them," the Lord Commander said with a softness that defied his age, his words scaring the young prince all the same and driving the smile from his face. "Your queen-mother would not wish for either of you to go near it."

"She wouldn't hurt them, though," Bran reasoned. "She's gentle and she sleeps most of the time so she has a chance to heal."

"How did she get hurt?" Myrcella asked with concern. "Is it bad?"

"She was charged by a giant stag," Bran explained, remembering it well. "We used our bows to bring it down before he got close, but he skidded and she still got hurt. It could've been worse, but she needs a chance to heal."

"Maybe father would let us see her when she's better," Myrcella said, hopeful and smiling. "He brought us all the way here, so if he wants to see her for himself mother won't mind as much if we can go with him."

"...I don't know," Tommen worried quietly, fearful. "She could be dangerous..."

"She isn't," Bran insisted. "She wouldn't hurt a fly."

"You make her sound like a pup herself," Myrcella laughed. "My brother likes cats more than dogs...or direwolves, it seems!"

"A direwolf could eat me..." Tommen muttered sadly.

"As if a lion couldn't," Myrcella japed, tapping the little golden lion quartered with the stag on the breast of the young prince's doublet, the prince laughing as she did. "But you're wearing one right now."

"Are there still any lions in the west?" Brandon asked, imagining great beasts as big or even bigger than the shewolf herself, proud creatures with manes as golden as the ore beneath their feet.

"I don't think there is," Myrcella said. "My grandfather would have one if there was."

"Oh," Brandon sighed with disappointment. "I was hoping I would be able to see them...I've always wanted to visit the south, but father says I'm not old enough yet."

"How come?" Myrcella asked, curious. "Mother says that Northmen rarely like to travel."

"We don't have many jousting tournaments in the North, and I want to be a knight," he said with a
Myrcella looked at him in surprise, both the royals and even the Lord Commander surprised by his words. "Really? I thought Northmen didn't keep the Seven?"

"Most of us don't," Brandon answered. "But Rodrik says that it doesn't matter what gods you keep, since being a knight is about being brave and honorable and defending the weak and the innocent, and he's a knight too."

"And Ser Rodrik is right," Ser Barristan Selmy said at last, Brandon's smile growing ever larger with every word the old knight said. "Being a knight is about more than just the gods you keep, it is about an ideal. To be brave, to be just, to defend the young and the innocent, to protect all women...all these are the things that make a knight what they are."

"And that's what made you a knight, too," Brandon added eagerly and happily to the man who was his hero in the way that no one else was, not even his father, speaking with a tide of words that he didn't even realize to stop. "I know all the stories about you; the tournament at Blackhaven where Prince Duncan named you the Bold, the tourney at King's Landing where you unhorsed Ser Duncan the Tall, how you rescued King Aerys...my favorite's the one about how you bested Maelys Blackfyre! It's what made me want to be a knight."

And then he realized what he had done, what it sounded like he had done, like a boy speaking to his king and telling him of all his glories, and went wide eyed. Had he just embarrassed himself in the eyes of the greatest of all the realm's knights, the man whose word could make a knight and unmake him just as easily, whose opinions could see a man be given the white cloak of a Kingsguard or forever spurned away from the chivalrous brotherhood? Had he just ruined himself in an outpour of childish adulation, ended his dreams before they had ever a chance to truly begin?

He expected many replies from the white cloaked knight, disappointed words and disapproving glares and a thousand other things.

But he hadn't expected laughter.

"It seems news of my deeds has reached even Winterfell," Ser Barristan smiled. "I am glad to know that they are inspiring others to heroism just as the tales of men like Ser Duncan the Tall and Symeon Star-Eyes had done for when I was your age."

Brandon looked towards the knight, blinking.

"You like the stories about Symeon Star-Eyes too?"

"Of course," the aged knight answered. "His deeds are as legendary in the south as they are in the north, and you wouldn't be able to find a single knight in all of Westeros who does not know of his deeds and quests. He and Galladon of Morne, so true a knight as to have earned the Maiden's favor, were my favorites to hear of as a page, and they were paragons of chivalry both."

"Maybe Bran could come back to King's Landing with us as a squire," Myrcella suggested to the Lord Commander with a smile. "That way, he can see the south and practice to be a knight at the same time...and father doesn't like Lancel very much either, so he could be his squire instead."

"Me? Squire for the King?" Brandon said with hopeful amazement. "Would he really do it?"
"He thinks of your father like a brother," Myrcella smiled. "And he doesn't like Lancel very much. I think he would be happy to have you there."

"His grace is one of the greatest warriors that the realm has ever known," the Lord Commander said. "There are few men who might make a better tutor in the ways of war."

And with that, Brandon grinned in the same way that he had when he had first seen Goldwing and the direwolves for the first time, utterly enthralled by the idea of being able to serve as the king's squire. He had heard all the king's tales the night before, stories of distant battles in the south and the triumph of the stag over the dragon and of masterful tactics, and a chance to serve the man from whom the rebellion against a mad king and a mad prince took its name, a man who was like the hero of the songs of old made real...he would have to ask his father, beg him even, and if he said no then he would smuggle himself out of the North in the bottom of a chest if he must, for there was nothing in his life now that he wanted more but the chance to join the Kingsguard as well.

And so he thought, thinking quick and hard as though Maester Luwin himself had asked him to solve one of his sums, even as they emerged from the hall behind the hall and into Winterfell's great hall proper, where the tables had already been set again by the castle's army of serving men and women and boys and girls, covered with cups and bowls and plates just like the night before, only less so, and with the great cask of ale that had been beneath the dais replaced with an open topped barrel of milk thistle tea, boiled with honey and lemon and ginger, all things that were said to be able to fight the aftereffects of too much wine and being steadily emptied with every cupful taken by groggy men and women alike, and it was for their sake that there was no music to go with breaking their fast and why the shutters that sealed the windows that would have otherwise filled the hall with brilliant light were only opened by the slightest amount, with the room being more properly lit by torches and braziers that burnt more dimly than the morning sun of a clear sky...and everywhere he looked, he saw more reasons as to why his father's command to have no more cups of wine that he thought were necessary was right; even Donnel Snowstark and the Smalljon Umber, the strongest of Winterfell's men, were clearly disoriented and weary from the night before, shielding their eyes from the light, and the smallest of all those men who were of an age with his brother Robb, Artos Swampstark, looked as though he was about to die in his seat, only his sister Lyanna looking anywhere near as bad off.

And unlike the night before, Robb and Jon were on the dais so that the king might have a chance to speak with them not that they were in any shape for such a thing...but when Brandon looked to his brothers, knowing how a man might look if he was still feeling the pain of having too much to drink the night before, he saw that they were the worst off of all, not because they had drank the most the night before, but because they were exhausted as well, with bags beneath their eyes and slumped over at the table, weary, to the king's amusement.

"Aye, you know you've drank too much when you're still drunk the morning after," Robert laughed, sat besides the Lord of Winterfell, who looked at his sons with a disappointed glare, only for Robert to look at him and smile. "They're just doing what we did, Ned."

"We never drank that much, Robert," Eddard replied softly.

"No, we didn't. We drank more," Robert said, taking a small sip of the tea before wincing and setting it down, pushing it towards the edge of the table where a servant would know to collect it. "...and we did it without any damned remedies, either."

"You're the one who drank more, Robert, not me," his father answered with a soft smile.
"Aye, I did, but you're the one who drank so much that you don't remember drinking more," Robert countered deftly, making the Lord of Winterfell who was thought by so many to be solemn and stoic laugh. "I'd ask if you still remembered the first night at Harrenhal, but gods, you probably don't. And don't you blame how many years ago it was."

"That might be so, but we should still try and set a good example for them, make them grow up better than we did," Eddard reasoned quietly as Brandon and the royals and the Kingsguard took their seat upon the dais, before muttering a tune. "...they've hired men with sharp pitchforks, who pricked him through the heart..."

"And the loader he has served him worse than that, for he's bound him to the cart," the king finished before roaring out a laugh. "Gods! I should have come here years ago. Not even Renly knows that damned song, and he could tell you where and when a bard wrote a tune from the first verse, so much he loves his music."

"What song?" Bran asked, he and Myrcella both curious.

"This one farmer's song from the Riverlands," the king answered to the both of them. "We heard them singing it as they took the harvest in whilst on the way to Harrenhal, before the rebellion, and once you hear it you never forget it."

"Aye," Eddard agreed. "Robert sang the whole song from memory after six cups of wine."

"It's a good song, to be fair," Robert laughed. "Might be I should ask your good brother if he's ever heard it, he gets round the Riverlands enough with all that whoring of his that he's got songs about him, too."

Both Brandon's mother and his great uncle looked to one another, then, and said a thousand words in silence as Brandon's plate was put before him, two rashers of bacon and two sausages twice as thick as his fingers and a fried egg that was perfectly done, all placed atop a thick slice of bread. It was a smaller meal than the norm, simply because of how great the feast had been the night before, but Brandon didn't mind, and neither did anyone else by the seems of things, with the great majority of the men and women in the hall only picking at it lightly, the wine of the night before having suppressed the appetite through the nausea that always followed too much wine, just as it had suppressed the spirit and made the room sullen and quiet. With Myrcella talking to her kingly father and his own mother and father talking amongst themselves for whatever reason was their own and Brandon having thought that he might have bothered his hero enough for a day, he looked towards his elder brothers...

...and saw that Robb was nearly asleep at the table, his own direwolf pup curled up between his feet for warmth and utterly ignoring Winter's attempts to play, dismissing his sibling with a wag of his tail.

"Did you two go out late?" he asked, taking knife and food-fork and putting them to food, cutting.

"No," Robb murmured in reply, resting his head on his hand and only taking it away when their lady mother gave him a look, leaving arms flat on the table as he examined the plate before him. "I couldn't sleep last night."

"Why?" he asked, taking the fork and impaling its four prongs through a square of bread and bacon and sausage and egg, all at once. "Did something happen?"
Jon looked to him then, and he had a look in his eye that Brandon had never seen before, a look of genuine fright. "Only the most scariest -"

"Don't tell him," Robb answered wearily. "He won't want to know after."

Brandon narrowed his brow. "I'm not scared. Tell me."

"No," Robb said again.

"Please?"

"He wants to know, Robb," Jon sighed. "It won't hurt him now."

"Please?" Bran repeated.

"You don't want to know," Robb said firmly.

"Well I had a bad dream last night," he said, hoping that telling them what woke him up might pry an answer out of either of them. "It had a three eyed raven in it, but it died."

Immediately, his two brothers straightened their backs and whatever unease they might have been trying to hide came rushing back to the foreground, with even Robb's pup seemed to churn and turn and whine with discomfort.

"We..." Robb said with a sigh before speaking as quietly as he could, clearly shaken by whatever it was that he had seen the night before. "We were in the stairwell and on our way back to our chambers when we heard my pup more scared than I had thought a direwolf could ever be, so we rushed through the door and heard a sound."

"It was like something out of a nightmare," Jon added without looking towards his younger brother. "It came from a crow out of the window, and gods, I never thought I'd ever see anything like it. It was more than madness."

"It had three eyes, all weeping blood," Robb said with a voice so low as to not even be a whisper. "And it moved, but not the way a normal raven might. It was as if it was trying to do everything at once."

Brandon shuddered, the words chilling him to the core for reasons he could not know. Was there somehow a connection between the raven in his dream and that of the one in the real world, some hidden meaning behind its flight towards him? Whatever the cause, his brother's words filled him with unease, even if Winter's playing licks and fuzzy warmth might have been enough to bury the fear that had come from his dark and twisted dream. And if so...then what did it mean? What had happened, for such a dream to have been so? Maester Luwin had once told him tales of how the mind was not entirely at rest when one was in bed, that even when in the deepest depths of sleep one could sometimes hear the sounds of the waking world and take them into their dreams, but if that was so, then what was happening before the bird flew? What were the Green Men doing to the old man who bled sap? And...and...who was she, whose body was cold as ice?

He didn't know, and Brandon began to wonder if Robb was right and whether or not he wanted to know at all.

"Brandon," his father said softly, bringing his mind back to the foreground and away from his
thoughts of the previous night. "The king wishes to speak with you."

"Yes, your grace?" he asked, putting the matter aside.

"My Myrcella tells me that you want to go south to squire," Robert started, Brandon's father listening in closely. "Is that so?"

"I've always wanted to be a knight, your grace," he said. "I've dreamed of being a member of the Kingsguard ever since I was little."

"Have you now?" Robert said, leaning back into his seat, thinking...and then he smiled. "Ned! What say I take your boy south with me when we leave, to squire?"

"Robert -"

"Aye, I know you're thinking he'll learn bad habits from me or something," the king interrupted with a laugh. "But Ser Barristan has no squire, and if your son wants to be a knight, he may as well learn from the best...if that is no issue for you, Selmy?"

"If his grace wishes for me to take him as my squire, then I shall teach him all that I know," Ser Barristan Selmy obeyed as Brandon looked on with awe and a barely contained excitement.

"Aye, and I'll promise him a place in the Kingsguard whenever he's ready for it," Robert said with a shrug. "Knowing some of my whitecloaks, I wouldn't be surprised if he could already best some of them in a fight, like Ser Boros."

"Is this what you truly want, Bran?" his father asked, looking towards him with serious eyes and speaking serious words. "Becoming a member of the Kingsguard should be a choice you do not make quickly, for members of the Kingsguard give up their families to focus on their duties, the same way men of the Night's Watch do."

"He doesn't have to make his choice now," Robert answered. "Might be he'll change his mind after a few years of squiring, either way, it won't do no harm."

"But being a squire will take him far from Winterfell," his mother said. "Are you sure about this?"

"I am," he said whole heartedly, knowing for certain that this was what he wanted to do, what he wanted to be.

"Then I'll take him south with me when this visit is done," Robert said to Eddard warmly. "He can squire for Ser Barristan and learn what he needs to be a knight, and when the time comes he can take the vows in the Great Sept of Baelor and choose what he wants to do next and whether or not he wishes to join my Kingsguard."

"If he does," the king reasoned, looking towards the young Stark and giving him an approving nod. "Then he can stay at the Red Keep till there's an opening for him and he gets a cloak of his own or till he changes his mind, either way. Might be it'll do Joffrey some good as well, the boy's been needing a friend close to his age."

"And might be Robb and Jon can come with him," the king reasoned. "They've been wanting to see the battlefields of the south and hear more of my stories, might as well do both at once and take them to Summerhall and Stony Sept and, aye, the Trident, too."
"What?" Eddard asked with surprise, he and his wife looking towards the eldest sons of Winterfell. "Is that so?"

"His grace offered," Robb answered with a hint of his weariness, his words half a fact and half an apology, deflecting the matter towards the king.

"Boys are made for travelling," Robert explained to the Lord of Winterfell and his wife. "It'll do them good to go so far south from Winterfell, give them a chance to meet people from the other realms, like you and me at the Eyrie did. Besides, it wouldn't be for that long either, mayhaps a month or three at the most. You can come along if you want, tell the boys about your side of the war."

And with that, Robb and Jon and Bran all looked towards their father, hopeful.

"I will think about it," Eddard sighed. "But I do not wish to hear of you making any more offers without telling them to me first, Robert."

"Fair enough, Ned," the king said, smiling. "That's the least I can do for your hospitality."

Brandon wasn't sure what happened, then, but he saw his father nod thankfully before turning back to his lady wife and talking quietly, too quietly for Bran to hear even whilst on the dais and in the dead silence of the court, but he paid no attention to that, more interested in breaking his fast than in listening in on their conversation or any other, shameful thing...and his appetite was certainly alive even if those of his brothers were not, for he hadn't drank anywhere nearly as much as any of them, with even his sister Sansa having had more wine than him. Instead, he looked down the dais, to where Domeric Bolton was sat next to his beloved Sansa, listening to the words she said before rising from his seat and walking out in utter silence, a cold and hard look in his eye and sadness and worry in those of Bran's elder sister, but he was sure that everything would be fine in the end, and ate, breaking his fast and sneaking half a sausage under the table for Winter to devour with a single, delighted bite, knowing from the moment that they had entered the hall that he was going to get a treat from his master, something different from the milk that his mother-shewolf gave and which had given him so thick a coat, and the smell of it roused even Robb's pup from its slumber with a curious sniff, looking towards his sibling's meal with want before turning towards his own master and pawing at his legs for something of his own.

Robb, hungover and tired, gave him a whole rasher of bacon that his direwolf was all too happy to accept. Winter looked at Brandon, wanting more so as to match his own brother, and so the young Stark gave him a bit of bacon too, the last piece of meat he had left on his plate and which the direwolf pup took happily, even licking up the little droplets of grease that might have fell from the fat and making him laugh at the sight.

"Time for arms practice?" his grace asked, curious.

"Normally," the Lord of Winterfell nodded. "But with half the men still hungover from last night, there won't be much practice. Still, it would be best to keep them all in the routine of it, even if Rodrik will teach them little today."

"They'll learn how to fight hungover," Robert said, rising from his seat. "There aren't many skills more useful than that."

Even his father seemed to laugh, then, before nodding to Rodrik Cassel further down the hall, Robb
climbing to his own feet without even needing to be told to.

"Weapons practice," the heir to Winterfell said to his wolves, his voice showing both how tired and how worn he was from the night before.

And so the Wolves of Winterfell, the young men of the court, rose from their seats, the great majority of them better off than their leader, and Brandon started with them towards the door, only looking back to see Robb talking to their father and the king with Jon alongside, no doubt explaining why they were so tired and what had happened the night before, so Bran went onwards, going with the tide of men through the door and out onto the courtyard...

...and where an armored figure was waiting for them, leaning on the low brick wall that separated the main training field and the armory from the archery range besides, cleaning his sword with a crimson rag. His armor was a pink that bordered on red, a marvelously smithed harness of plate that covered him from head to heel in scarlet steel patterned with the telltale lines of flayed flesh, of the muscle that was beneath skin, and over his shoulders was a great cloak of skin covered cloth dotted with dozens of blood drops of the darkest satin, all fastened by a pair of screaming faces, half skinned and distorted by their agony. But it was the helm that caught Brandon's eye the most, a piece of metalwork made to look like the head of a man whose skin and fat had been flensed from their corpse, but in the shadow of the raised visor he saw the familiar face of whom such grotesque imagery was a sigil and not a nightmare.

Dome ric Bolton.

"Prince Joffrey, of the house Baratheon!" he shouted, rising to his full stature as he tossed the cleaning rag aside, marching across the courtyard to the wolves of Winterfell, where the golden haired prince was stood, wide eyed besides his hound. "I demand justice!"

"What is the meaning of this?" the king asked as he pushed through the crowds in reply to the sound of his son's name, the Lord Commander close behind and with his hand on his pommel. "Who are you? What has Joffrey done to anger you so?"

"I am Dome ric, of the house Bolton," came the answer, the heir to the Dreadfort standing before his king. "Lady Sansa is my beloved, and she has made it known to me that your son and heir, Joffrey, has been trying to court her, all in attempt to steal her away from me so that she might be his queen, even though she wishes not."

"Dome ric," Sansa said, rushing to his side. "You don't have to do this, let me speak with my fath-

"No," Dome ric said with eyes as hard and pale as iron, like those of his father. "He has insulted you and your honor. There must be justice."

"Aye, but is it true that you love him so?" Robert asked, facing Brandon's eldest sister. "Say, and I will have no more of this."

"But, father," Joffrey said. "Let us settle this with a duel -"

"No," the king commanded, his voice steel. "I will not have you fighting for a woman who loves another."

All eyes turned towards the eldest of the Stark girls, then, towards Brandon's sister.
"I...I love Domeric," she said, all watching in silence. "We would be betrothed, but my father doesn't like betrothals..."

"Is this true, Ned?" the king asked solemnly as he turned towards his friend.

"Aye," Eddard answered. "It is incase she might change her mind with age. I wouldn't have any of my children married to someone they cannot come to love."

"Then there will be no more of this," the king said, turning towards a stunned Joffrey. "Leave her be, or it will be me you deal with next and your mother be damned."

"Yes, father," Joffrey said with an obedient bow, turning towards Sansa. "I am sorry for any disrespect, Lady Stark."

Sansa seemed to relax at that, for the first time since the king's arrival, but Domeric stepped forth all the same. "But honor needs to be sated. If he wishes a duel, then we shall have one for honor's sake, to show that justice was done, to first blood and nothing more."

Then Sansa looked to her beloved in horror as Joffrey turned to his father, who simply nodded. The prince swallowed, and turned back towards Domeric.

"I accept."

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End of Part 21!

Chapter End Notes

Like usual, this was a fun one to write...and a challenging one as well, since I must have wrote and rewrote practically every section of it at least twice before finishing the part, but I think the quality of it all makes it more than worthwhile :p

And of course, this is the first part of my new story rotation! :D That means that, instead of writing five parts per story, I'm only writing one - so that means I'm going onto the Dragon of Harrenhal next, if you've been waiting for that story, but it'll only get one part before I rotate around to the next thing on my list. For those on AlternateHistory, just check my status page to see what I'm working on next, since I post progress updates regularly to let people keep track of how things are going and what's being done :)

And...on another matter, I'm starting to second guess myself about a certain decision - the inclusion, or rather removal, of italicized thoughts like this one. I started to think they were rather clumsy around the time that I wrote the first part of Raiders of the Lost City, my travel story about the adventures of Tyrion Lannister and a band of others setting out to Gogossos, but the more I work without them, the more I realize that they filled in a role that otherwise can't be filled without some really awkward prose in the form of providing a perspective into the character's own views and opinions. So, expect them to make a come back, but if they do, they won't be anywhere near as common as they were originally and in the first batch of parts for this story, the test parts where I mostly
hammered out the setting, since I'll admit to overusing them :p

And now, to the summary...and oh boy, where to start? I'll try to keep things short this time, since summaries are meant to be...well, summaries, not huge walls of text that are like a story after the story.

So, short summary:

First, we see Bran's view of the certain event that happened the night before, which should give some insight into exactly what happened...but I will say no more than that - I like to hear people theorize about the way that the story is going :p

Then we see Bran and Myrcella talking amongst themselves and the first reaction of the royals to seeing a real, live direwolf, though at this time Winter is little more than a puppy, though having his mother around to give him milk has accelerated his growth quite a bit, primarily in the development of a fur coat that would be necessary for any animal (and especially a newborn one) to survive in the frigid cold of the Lands Beyond the Wall and in the cold snows of the North itself; right now, Winter looks more like a great big ball of fluffy fur than he does a direwolf, simply because the rest of his body hasn't caught up with the growth of his coat yet. If you google malamute puppy, you'll have some idea of what he looks like, and that he's not quite as terrifying as you might expect the pup of a horse sized wolf to be :p

And of course, we have Brandon making his wish to go south and become a member of the Kingsguard known to Robert and the royal family...and it is a wish that Robert has decided to grant, and in a way that Brandon couldn't possibly turn down - a chance to serve as the squire of his most beloved hero, Ser Barristan Selmy himself.

And of course things get messy between Domeric and Joffrey, as the former has most certainly not taken kindly towards the latter's attempts to charm his beloved Sansa and especially not his ignoring of the fact that she isn't at all interested in him in this universe, and the part above makes it clear the result of such a thing - an honest duel with which to settle the dispute...

...and the resolution of which will be seen in the next part, whose PoV character will be Sansa!

So ends part 21! :D
Sansa II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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A few hours later, Winterfell.

Sansa sighed sadly and quietly as she walked across the courtyard in silence, the rest of her family and their household and their wards and their guards and all the others who stayed within the walls of Winterfell going about their lives the best they could as the servants carefully carried out the immensely delicate work of creating an outline of brick upon its middle, the invisible walls of the arena in which the duel between Bolton and Baratheon would take place, walls that even her brother Robb was not allowed to come near for the risk of making the fight unfair. The prince was stood on the far side of the courtyard, opposite the Bolton and alongside his father and grandfather, the king watching with eager eyes as the men of the royal retinue fastened a suit of plate onto the golden haired prince, Joffrey and the king talking quietly between the two, discussing tactics or any number of things outside the range of her hearing, but it was the Lord of Casterly Rock who looked on to Domeric with unwavering eyes of green...

...eyes that made her fear for her betrothed and all the more resentful that he saw fit to duel the prince for the sake of his honor.

"Must you do this?" she asked as the Bolton was sat upon a stool, visor raised to let him breath and to keep him cool before the start of the fight. "I love you, not him. My father would never make me marry someone I didn't care about."

"It's about more than that, Sansa," he sighed, shifting his weight in his armor as he leaned forward. "I have no choice but to fight. I have to."

"But why?" she asked. "Why must you risk everything for this, Domeric?"

"You probably think I'm doing it for honor, don't you?" he said, the hint of a smile appearing on his cheeks as he turned to face her. "I'm not, Sansa."

"Then if not for honor's sake, then why?"

"I have no choice," he answered solemnly. "If I don't fight for you, then people would think that I don't love you nearly as much as I do. They would think that I am lying. I have to fight him, Sansa. I have to fight him for you."

"But I don't want you to fight him," she said, her growing fear and unease spreading into her voice. "What if you get hurt? What if you lose?"

"You don't understand," he sighed again, the struggle to put his reasoning into words clear on his face. "This is just what men have to do."

"Aye," came the voice of the king as he strode across the courtyard, the towering and broad shouldered Baratheon meeting the two with a warm voice. "It is."
"Can't you stop this, your grace?" she asked quickly and quietly. "I love Domeric -"

"Love isn't the matter that causes the duel," the king explained, saying what Domeric couldn't, the Bolton agreeing with his words with a nod of his head as he spoke. "It is that my son and heir tried to win your hand when you were already being charmed by another. It's a matter of honor, and not just his, but his father's and his family's, too."

"Exactly," Domeric said to his beloved. "I have to fight him to protect you as much as to protect my family's image."

"It is duty of men, girl," Robert said, pulling in another seat and dropping himself into it. "Any man would have to do the same thing."

And then the king smiled, looking to the Bolton. "I hope you aren't going to take this as a chance to kill the prince and call it an accident?"

"No, your grace," the Bolton answered, seeming to laugh inside at the king's words. "It's only to first blood."

"First blood can be last blood too if you strike him in the right place, though that wife of mine might as well think they're the same thing with how fuming she is about it all," Robert mused before turning to the Bolton again. "I hold no ill feelings to you for this, though, Bolton"

The king extended a open hand.

"Thank you, your grace," the Bolton smiled, reaching out and shaking the king's hand. "For understanding."

"Aye, well, if there's anything I know it's about this sort of thing," the king laughed. "Win or lose, you two won't have any trouble from us again, that I swear."

"Thank you, your grace," Sansa thanked with a happy smile. "Will Joffrey...leave me be?"

"He will now," the king explained. "None of us in the south knew that you two were together, you see, else I would have dragged him away the moment he said a word. We don't hear much about what happens in Winterfell in the south."

"We don't hear much about what happens in the south as well, your grace," Domeric smiled as the king's famous charisma began to show itself again. "Is everything well?"

"I wouldn't be here if it was," Robert reasoned. "But it isn't so bad as to stop me from being able to come here to Winterfell for awhile and leave my brother Renly to sit the throne for awhile. I'm looking for a Hand."

"My father would be happy to take the role, your grace," Domeric said.

"Aye, he would," Robert laughed. "But I don't think the rest of the realm would be so happy to see him in King's Landing. They had enough of him in the south during the rebellion. And besides, he's too quiet for the capital."

"You met Lord Bolton?" Sansa asked.
"I must have met half the lords of Westeros during the war," the king answered, reminiscing with a smile. "We didn't talk much. He was too quiet, quieter than your father for certain, and never one for japes as well. He would have probably slaughtered the prisoners we took as well if he was allowed to."

"...that sounds like my father," Domeric sighed, Sansa nodding in understanding, knowing well how her beloved's father was from Domeric's own tales.

"...your grace," she said quietly and with discomfort. "I know you're here to try and get my father as Hand, but why is he here?"

"Who?" the king asked, only for her to flick her eyes towards the Lord of Casterly Rock and make the king laugh. "Oh, him. I haven't any idea about what brought him north, and I don't think Jaime or that wife of mine know either. He came on his own."

"You mean he joined his party to yours?" Domeric asked.

"Exactly," Robert shrugged, massive shoulders moving freely beneath his golden doublet. "He came and joined us not long before we reached the Twins. He talks more than your father did, aye, but I would rather listen to Roose rambling on about how no one complains about animals being flayed but how doing it to a man is wrong than listen to Tywin say...anything. That father of yours is the quiet kind of man, that's something I understand..."

"...but Tywin Lannister," Robert said. "He's nothing like that. Aye, he'll talk with you if you speak to him, he'll even talk with you for hours, but there's something about him when you're doing so that makes it...uncomfortable. It's like talking to a scarecrow."

And then the king sighed...and then he laughed.

"So aye! I haven't an idea what's brought him north, but if it's enough to get him to leave Casterly Rock then it has to be important," he finished before turning to . "Why? Does he bother you?"

"He doesn't scare me," Sansa said, her words half a lie. "He just hasn't stopped staring at Domeric since the duel."

"I wouldn't worry about it much," the king smiled. "He's just looking him over for weaknesses, trying to see if there is anything that could give Joffrey an advantage."

"But why aren't you?" she asked, confused.

"Because this is something between him and me," Domeric explained, the king nodding. "He's done wrong and I have to be the one to right that wrong, that's why it is just the two of us and no one else."

"Exactly so," the Baratheon smiled before turning to Sansa. "Win or lose it makes little difference, once the matter of honor's been dealt with he won't bother either of you again, and that goes for Tywin and Joffrey both. Is it so surprising that I don't mind if my son loses?"

"It is," she said honestly.

"I had hoped that your father and I would have been able to make a marriage between our houses, the one that should have been," the king said, his voice growing more somber for a moment before
he forced it out and returned to his more jovial self. "But there are always more women around for Joffrey, and I would never force a woman - Stark or not - to marry him if they didn't want it."

"Because of -"

"You needn't ask," the king said firmly, iron forming in his voice before he relaxed and let himself smile, an idea coming to mind. "Besides, you two seem happy enough together. Haven't you a sister, too?"

"I do," she. "She's only eight, so she hasn't found anyone she likes enough to marry, though."

"Might she be interested in Joffrey?" the king asked, intrigued. "She would be a queen, the mother of the realm, free to do whatever she willed and with all the ladies of the realm looking to her for guidance."

"I don't think you know my sister very well, your grace," Sansa said, allowing herself to laugh. "She's not very ladylike. She would go hunting if our mother let her, and she sneaks off into the city."

"So she's tough, then?"

"I would say so," Sansa thought for a moment before nodding. "She likes to tell people what to do, too."

"All the better," Robert said, a smile forming on his face. "I'll have to speak to your father about it all, but mayhaps, if she's willing, that sister of yours will be queen someday."

"Knowing Arya, she would love to be able to boss people around and make them do whatever she wants," Domeric laughed. "Queen Arya, Commander of Men."

Sansa and the king both laughed at that...

...and then Rodrik walked over, his cloak fastened tight around him, and Sansa looked forward to see the crown prince stood on the opposite side of the courtyard, encased in plate from head to heel, armor of the highest quality and of the latest design, forged in King's Landing by master armourers and expertly fitted to him so as to not impede his movements in the slightest. It was a prince's plate, worn so easily upon him as to be more like a second skin than not and making even the armor of her brothers look crude in comparison, polished to a shining silver perfection but for the few imperfections that were the scratches of time spent on the practice field, but it was the breastplate that caught her eye, where the stag and the lion were etched into the metal, face to face. The entire courtyard fell silent at the sight of the prince and his golden curls and the antlered helm beneath his arm, whatever arrogance he might have had vanquished by the realization of what it was that he was expected to do next and replaced by utter seriousness and a little unease befitting his youth of two and ten namedays, a stark contrast to Domeric's calm certainty, the seven and ten year old Bolton nearly a man-grown and towering just shy of a foot over the crown prince, and she felt her heart rise inside of her chest at the sight.

Domeric was going to win. She could feel it.

"It is time, my lord," the master-of-arms said with a slight bow, giving the Bolton heir a lord's courtesy. "Only you. Everyone else must stay ten feet away, so that none can interfere."
"I'll see you again soon, my lady," Domeric said with a smile as he rose from his seat, revealing his height for all to see before striding across the courtyard and into the square of bricks.

And there, he spoke with his opponent, the two saying words too quiet for Sansa to hear from so far away, prince and heir stood face to face as a septon and one of the Green Men spoke the words and made it clear that the gods, Old and New, were watching. That the duel would be won by the righteous one.

"Is the prince any good at fighting, your grace?" she asked, turning to the king.

"He's not too bad," the king said honestly. "Not great, but good enough to get by. I would've been able to make a warrior out of him if his mother had let me start training him sooner. He'll probably lose, but he'll put up a fight, aye. Why? How good is that Domeric of yours?"

"He's not the best sword in Winterfell," she said. "That's Jon, but he's good."

"When I was young, Jon Arryn told me it was always hard to measure how good a swordsman was," Robert said. "Some knights are alright, some are good, some are great and some are excellent...and then you get men like Arthur Dayne."

"Then he's great, your grace."

"Aye?" Robert asked only for her to nod as he turned to the front. "Then this should be a short enough fight."

For a moment, there was silence as the master-of-arms and the men of faith departed from the square, leaving the two to face one another.

"Do you really want my sister to marry Joffrey?" she asked quietly, watching as a servant brought her Domeric his sword, a longsword etched with crimson drops and with a screaming face for a pommel.

"Some men think I'm a fool," Robert said lowly, watching as his son raised his sword, the two men circling one another in their arena to the near silence of all, watching for an opening through the narrow slits of their visors. "They think I only think with my hammer."

Then there was the clang of the first strike, the high wail of steel on steel echoing through the open courtyard and off the walls in a way that practice swords never could. Her attention snapped towards the fight, to her Domeric, the Stark girl staring to see that it had been the prince to have struck the first blow, a scratch across the Bolton's plate revealing the true color of the metal beneath, but Domeric wasted no time in making a counter his own, bringing his sword up to catch the Baratheon blade on the crossguard, Joffrey yelping with pain as the force of his own strike reverberated up his sword and up his arm and into his shoulder...

...and with that, Domeric took his chance and threw his weight forward, grabbing the middle of his sword with an armored hand as he pushed himself onwards, sending the Baratheon staggering in retreat before hurling himself onto him with a shove and a kick at the exact moment the crown prince took his foot off the ground, the two men crashing against the stones of the courtyard with a booming clatter of metal plates rolling and groaning and clashing against one another in a brawl she could barely see in the shining of their armor and in the fast, frenzied movements of the two struggling against one another.
"I'm no fool," Robert said. "I've been in dozens of battles and only ever lost one, and I've never lost a melee, not even at Harrenhal when Arthur Dayne and Barristan Selmy were there. I know what a good marriage will mean, and marrying my son and heir to a Northern girl is the best marriage I could hope to have."

"But what about the Reach?" she asked. "Don't the Tyrells have a daughter?"

"Aye, they do, and Renly's been trying to throw her at me for years," the king laughed. "No, a Tyrell would be good, but there's better, and that sister of yours, Arya, is the best. As many men as the Reach, but with an alliance with the Riverlands as well and a fleet too."

"She's only eight," Sansa said, unsure of whether or not her sister was old enough to be able to make such a choice herself. "She's too young to be married."

"Your father killed his first man at ten, did he ever tell you that?"

Sansa looked to the king then, surprised, only the ladylike grace that was expected of the eldest daughter of Winterfell stopping him from being able to see that he had caught her off guard.

"He never told us," she admitted quietly. "Who was it?"

"A mountain clansman, in the Vale," Robert said, watching as Joffrey managed to slide from the Bolton's grip and kick Domeric's helm as he did, the Bolton snapping backwards and dazed as the metal rung like a bell. "We were on the way to Runestone for a feast when they came upon us from the woods. I hadn't even had a chance to raise my weapon before they started running away again, realizing we were more heavily armed than they thought we were, but not before that father of yours ran some poor sod through left to right, from one side to the other."

"Gods, I remember his face when he realized what he had done," Robert murmured. "He was more dazed than anything else, but it was having to give the man mercy afterwards that made him realize what death was. Before then he had been more like Brandon."

"My uncle?"

"Your brother," the king explained. "It made him grow up. He stopped being a boy and became a man, aye, and I think the same thing happened to you."

"...your grace?" she asked, confused.

"You're closer to my Myrcella in age than you are to Domeric," the king said. "But you're acting more like a woman thrice your age than a girl like her."

"How so?" she asked.

"The way you talk is one," the king laughed. "You're too proper for your age, aye, you're more formal than I am, girl, and more than Ned or Jon ever were."

And then the king softened, and he met her with an understanding eye. "Don't be so quick to try and make yourself grow up. You'll have plenty of time to be a lady when you're older, but for now, there's nothing wrong with having fun and relaxing whilst you still can. You only get one chance at it, you might as well spend it well."
"I..." she murmured, thinking...and then she smiled. "Thank you, your grace. I'll try to remember that."

And with that she turned her attentions to the fight once more, and saw to her horror that her Domeric was losing - not quickly, but slowly, slowly being battered down, slowly being worn out, slowly being hammered into submission with fist and foot and blade, the Bolton running out of stamina and overheating inside his armor in a way that the younger Baratheon and his beautifully forged plate did not. Domeric fell backwards, towards the edge of the arena, and her eyes widened as a roar began to rise from the crowds as he shook with a failing balance, threatening to fall out from within the confines of the arena, to lose, heels trembling...

...and then he found his balance again, and when the Baratheon prince threatened to push him out again he grabbed him by the wrist, whatever confidence the Bolton heir might have had long since replaced by grim determination and whatever honor replaced by a desire and a willingness to do whatever it took to win. A cunning that his family was well known for and one that had been sharpened and honed by years of reading and learning to enhance his intellect and mated with a warrior's training, for Domeric did not simply advance on him, he didn't throw an gauntleted fist, no, he slammed his armored head into the prince's own, their swords long since discarded for their armored brawl, the young prince reeling backwards only for her Domeric to advance on him again, darting across the ground with fast strides that were more like leaps than not, and it was then that he won the fight.

Not with a sword wound to make the blood clear for all to see, not with a grapple to pin the prince in place and make it impossible for him to escape, not even by pushing him out of the bounds of the arena and forcing him to concede, no, he did none of those things. He took him on. Hooking his foot around behind the back of the young prince's, he yanked his leg back towards him and made the prince lose his footing, and as the prince began to fall...

....he kicked him, straight to the underside of his helm as the prince groaned loudly.

In an instant the groan turned to an agonized shout, the white cloaks of the Kingsguard rushing over as fast as their legs could carry them and with the queen not far behind, the Lord Commander leading the charge and stepping over the bricks and pushing the Bolton away from the fallen prince, Ser Barristan Selmy crouching down to Joffrey and raising his visor to reveal lips covered with blood, the Baratheon prince spitting it on the stone before opening his mouth and -

"He'll need a maester," the Lord Commander said to the king. "He bit through his tongue."

"I will see him there," her father said, stood on the opposite side of the courtyard from her and the king. "Maester Luwin can tend to his wounds."

"Gods!" the Queen snapped as the crowd grew raucous, Lannister and Stark men jostling to see the blow for themselves. "Joffrey!"

"It was a fair hit," the king said, his mighty voice overpowering the crowd and bringing it to calm once more. "Joffrey, you fought well. Go with Ned, he'll make sure you're looked after well."

The prince, his tightly shut lips covered in blood and his green eyes filled with pain, looked to his father then, and all Sansa saw was the happiest pride she had ever seen in all her life, the look of a son receiving the praise he so desperately wanted. He nodded with a smile, ignoring his mother's fretting, before turning on his heels and following the Lord of Winterfell just as Domeric walked back over to Sansa, his visor raised to reveal the flushed cheeks beneath and the brow covered in
"Seven hells," he said. "That was closer than I thought it would be."

"Thought Joffrey would be a pampered prince, eh?" Robert asked before bursting into laughter. "He was a year or two ago. You would've had him in a minute then. I've been teaching him how to fight, aye, and it's given us something to bond over. I'll make a fighter out of him yet, and a leader too."

"He fought like a bear," the Bolton said with a weak voice, slumping into his seat, exhausted.

"I taught him," Robert said with a growing grin. "You can't get first blood with a sword these days, not lest you want to kill someone. Plate armor's too good for it. He was trying to get you out the square."

"He was," Domeric agreed, panting for breath, removing his helm and letting his soaked hair come free. "He almost got me."

"Give it a year and he will, if you want another bout," the king laughed, turning his eyes to Sansa. "We'll have to have it in King's Landing! Call it thanks for your father's hospitality."

"I think he'd be happy to come," she smiled. "Domeric and I have always wanted to see the south."

"That's true," Domeric sighed, leaning back in his seat, exhausted. "But mayhaps we'll skip the fight."

Robert laughed, then, smiling. "It helps if you get out of the armor quickly. It'll stop you from getting too hot."

"I'll get up," Domeric sighed once more, pushing himself up off his wooden seat, staggering to his feet and needing to lean on the chair for support...

...and so Sansa hurried to his side and gave him her arm as though they were walking together like usual, helping to keep the worn out Domeric from falling. The king, experienced in such things, rose from his seat as the Lord Commander came over, Robert reaching for the leather straps that fastened Domeric's breastplate together and loosening them, letting cold air into the metal oven that was his chest, and almost instantly the Bolton sighed in relief.

"Who fitted this armor on you?" the king asked, looking to the straps before looking to Domeric's light eyes. "...you did it yourself, didn't you?"

"Everyone else was busy," Domeric said honestly.

"Don't do it again," Robert said, knowing. "You did the straps too tight."

"It seemed right," the heir to the Dreadfort answered, looking down for himself.

"It is easy for it to go unnoticed," Ser Barristan said softly, looking for himself. "Your padding was being pressed against you the entire time when it is supposed to rest against you."

"You might as well have been wearing a blanket," Robert laughed, "There's a reason knights have squires to help them with their armor, and it isn't just because they're lazy."
"Come on," she said softly. "We'll go to the armoury."

"Thank you, my lady," Domeric answered with a grateful smile, Sansa taking the first step and him following, the two walking together as the king laughed and turned his attentions on the other boys of the castle...

...allowing Domeric to speak more freely.

"I thought I was going to lose," he admitted under his breath. "I hit him, hit him and then hit him again and it was like he was made of iron under that armor."

"He's King Robert's son," she said with a smile.

"You wouldn't think it, seeing the hair and all, but Seven have mercy, he is Baratheon through and through when it comes to a fight."

"But you won, and that's the only part that matters."

"I guess, but it was much closer than I thought it would be," he sighed. "I'll put more effort on the courtyard from now on. I won't have a fight being that close again."

"Maybe you could ask Jon for help?" she suggested. "He's one of the best swords in the castle."

"Do you think he would...want to?" he asked, hoping.

"I think he'd be happy to," she smiled.

"I'll ask him when I get a chance," Domeric said. "What did you and Robert talk about, anyway?"

"He was curious about Arya," she laughed. "I think he's going to try and see if Joffrey will have more luck with her than me."

"It wouldn't be a bad marriage for her," Domeric reasoned. "He's strong, and as queen...well, she'll be able to tell you what to do."

"Or else her husband would come and get in a fight with mine," Sansa laughed with him. "That would make her happy."

"It would," Domeric said, growing more serious as they walked. "It would suit her, as well. She's always been better with sums than dancing."

"So being queen would make everyone dance badly," Sansa laughed again. ""

"I am being serious, Sansa," Domeric said. "She would make a good queen."

"Do you really think so?" Sansa asked. "Isn't she too...wild?"

"You know how much the singers say Robert loved your aunt and everyone knows she was more like Dacey than not," he answered. "It might help. Sure, she wouldn't be able to tell everyone what to do, but she would be queen, and that means she might as well be the king as far as most people are concerned. Servants, knights, even lords, they'd all do what she wanted them to do because they wouldn't want Joffrey to know that they didn't...and of course, a queen needs respect."
"She really would like to be queen, wouldn't she?" Sansa asked with a growing understanding, an understanding that went beyond being a simple joke to something serious. "Maybe I should speak to my father about it when I get the chance...he could talk to her about it."

"I think it would be great," Domeric smiled as the two came to a stop outside the armory, the Bolton giving her hand the lightest squeeze before letting go again. "I'll talk with you more later, when I'm out of this armor...we could go for a walk, if you want?"

"Gladly," she said with a smile, trying to escape the ladylike manners that had been drilled into her from birth for just a moment. "I'll be in the Godswood till then."

Domeric looked at her strangely, then, confused...and then he laughed in realization. "The pup!"

"She hasn't wanted to leave her mother for days," she said.

"And you don't want to try and take a pup from its mother," he said with a smile. "How sweet of you."

"She has fangs," she said, making her beloved laugh. "It helps keep her comfy. The mother and the pup."

"Haven't you came up with a name yet?"

"Not yet," she admitted. "But I'll think of one eventually. It'll be good."

"Aye, well, I best get this armour off," he said. "If your brothers spot me in it I'll never -"

"There he is!" her brother Robb laughed with a japing, accusatory voice, walking over to them with a wide smile and his friends behind him. "The man who hit the prince!"

"He'll hang for that," Tygett Darkstark laughed. "What was it like?"

"I've got to get out of this plate," Domeric said. "But I'll tell you all about it inside if you help."

Robb laughed with that, Jon and Brandon and even Arya too, and with that Domeric pushed the door open and stepped inside and they followed, talking amongst themselves about how he had been able to strike the prince, how he had won the duel, but knowing how close it had been as well. That had only served to make it all the more thrilling, she knew, but some few of them were making jokes about how nearly lost to a man nearly five years his younger. But her Domeric took it all in stride, and she couldn't help but smile as she turned away and started towards the Godswood, humming to herself, thinking....and not so much about the duel as it was about her sister. Would Arya truly want to be queen, if she was given the chance? Joffrey seemed alright and she might very well have paid him more interest if she was not already in love with her Domeric, and he was certainly no coward, certainly not, he had bravely stepped forward when challenged and fought a Bolton whose armor was adorned with screaming faces and flayed men.

And if she did marry him one day...could they be happy together? As she would be with her Domeric?

It made her wonder. Not just for what the future might hold, but what her sister wanted her future to be. Did she want to be a warrior woman like Dacey, or more so, like one of the Ironborn woman
captains and generals who slaughtered their way through the Riverlands in ages past? Did she want to have a family, sons and daughters to call her own, or would she do as Dacey's sister Alysome had done and have a family of bastards and never wed? Might she even try to convince their father to give her lands of her own to rule in her own right so as to make a branch of the Starks just as how Alayne Stark had given rise to the Seastarks who manned the North's wooden wall, its fleets of holks and galleys on the eastern shore?

What did she want? She was her sister and even Sansa didn't know for sure. She thought, and thought, and thought...

...and walked right into someone walking to the Godswood just as she was. She yelped as she stumbled on the stones, only to fall into their arms as they dropped whatever it was they were holding to catch her instead, tumbling into a surcoat of orange and black and white, looking up to see eyes of the darkest violet, so dark as to be almost blue, looking at her with surprise. It was Horonno Vaenyris, the Free Citizen of Volantis who had come across the narrow sea to teach her brother the ways of war, a man she spoke little with but knew from how he had tuned Domeric's harp for him not long after he arrived, the harp a popular instrument amongst the Old Blood within the Black Walls of Volantis.

"My apologies, my lady," the Volantene said instantly and with the highest courtesy as Sansa found her footing again. "I hadn't noticed you."

"It was my fault," she said, sorry. "You dropped your..."

She looked to the ground...

...and on the cobblestones was a book, a thing of ancient leather and Valyrian glyphs undermarked by their translation in the Westerosi alphabet. *Engines of War*, by the legendary Valyrian war historian Ayrmidon, a figure so famous for his accurate accounts of the battles of his day that even she - a girl whose lessons on history were focused more on household matters and the whys of war rather than the hows - knew who he was.

"That tome has survived four hundred years in a library," Vaenyris said softly, reaching down to pick it up and inspecting it carefully only to smile, the leather cover having protected the fragile parchment within. "And it seems it will survive four hundred more."

"Is...is it safe to take it from the library when its so old?" she asked, surprised.

"Books are made to be written, my lady, and this book is still strong enough to be handled more roughly than not," the Free Citizen explained. "This is one of the only full copies in the world, though."

"Sorry," she said again.

"Ah, worry not," he answered. "There are a dozen of these, but only one Sansa Stark. The leather is strong enough to take a fall...though we should count our blessings that it hasn't been raining lately."

"Indeed," she smiled before looking to the book, realizing. "Why are you bringing that book to the Godswood, anyway?"

"I thought it would be a pleasant place to read it," he answered, honest. "The servants are replacing the shutters in my bedchamber. They'll be done by the evening, but that is many hours away and I
would rather not waste time. The godswood is quiet...and more relaxing than I would have thought it to be."

"You've been there before?"

"Once or twice," he smiled, walking with her into the wood and looking around with a wide smile as he did. "There is nothing like this in Volantis, not even within the Black Walls where the gardens and manses are as big as your family's great keep."

"Do you ever miss it?"

"Volantis is Valyria's heir," he said with true pride. "There is nowhere in the world like it...but I would not be able to teach others the things that I have learned if I was to stay within the Black Walls."

"How come?" she asked. "Is there a law?"

"You could say that," he sighed. "Politics are...cutthroat is the best word I can think of in your tongue. The Tigers and the Elephants have been fighting for years, but the Tigers have been winning and the Elephants do not like that much at all."

She looked at him then, her need for an explanation shown clear for him to see.

"Volantis is ruled the way Valyria was," he said. "We have no kings, queens or lords and ladies there. We have men and women, who choose from amongst their own number who is to rule by voting at elections."

"Does it work? Well, I mean?"

"Valyria conquered half of what it knew the world to be at the time, conquering all from the Narrow Sea to the Sarne River, even Andalos, and would have made quick work of Westeros too if it crossed the Narrow Sea," he answered with a smile. "Volantis fought all of the other Free Cities and the Stormlands to a standstill on its own, and would have likely won were it not for Aegon Targaryen coming atop Balerion the Black Dread."

"Did he burn them?" she asked. "Like at Harrenhal? Or the Field of Fire?"

"A few times, but never to the scale of either," Vaenyris answered. "It was the sight of a dragonlord riding against Valyria's first and greatest daughter that made them lose the war. The men lost heart, and no matter how great one's commanders are or how experienced the men, a soldier with a broken heart cannot win."

"And that ended the dream of reforging the Freehold for the first time," he sighed, the two stood but a dozen feet from the wierwood tree in the garden's midst, the great tree tall and broad and as white as bone, the Citizen perking up with curiosity at the sight. "It is strange how there is nothing like this in Essos."

"There are no wierwoods in Essos," she said. "The Children of the Forest planted them and carved their faces."

"That is where you are wrong," he said with a smile, finding a clearing to sit upon, the book in his lap. "Tell me, have you ever heard of the Ifequevron? They live to the east of the Sarne, past the old
kingdom of the Sarnori before the Dothrakui razed it to the ground."

"No," she answered, sitting alongside, intrigued. "Who were they?"

"Allow me to describe them to you," he said with a playing smile. "I imagine you'll realize who they were before I finish."

She smiled back, leaning in and listening.

"...they were small..."

"...they lived in forests..."

"...they had magic..."

"...and they carved trees."

"You mean the Children of the Forest...?" she asked with surprise. "How could they have lived so fear east?"

"Live," he corrected. "They still live there, if what the Dothraki say of wood walkers is true. Even those mad savages are afraid to enter their woods. They say that a look from one of them will drive their horses wild."

"Skinchangers."

"Exactly so," Vaenyris nodded. "Valyria once sent an expedition there as a favor for the Sarnori - a debt owed from the days of the last of the Ghiscari Wars, you see - and met them in battle," Vaenyris said.

"...did they lose?" she asked with growing unease.

The Free Citizen burst into laughter.

"They slaughtered them by droves," Vaenyris said. "You cannot change into a dragon's skin. It is impossible. Valyria bound their beasts with magic as much as with whip and word and love. Dragons are too strong willed to break even without such things, but with it they were impossible to take. They recorded such in their texts, you see. Valyrians loved writing, and Volantis has a library as big as the one in Winterfell devoted to dragon lore."

"Truly?"

"Truly," he said with a smile. "From floor to ceiling of scrolls and books all about dragons. How they breed, how they fight, how to tame them, how to armor them -"

"Valyrian dragons wore armor?" she asked with amazement.

"In ancient days, yes," he said. "They often used to use sheets of dragonbone fastened together with iron nails or cut down like scalemail. It was strong, but flexible and light. It gave them added protection against scorpions...such as that which killed Meraxes. They made special helmets to cover the eyes, you see, like those that a knight would wear here in Westeros."
"You must know more about dragons than Maester Luwin," she laughed.

"No more than most Volantenes would be able to tell you," Vaenyris said with a smile, turning his eyes to the book before him at last. "My speciality is in warcraft, but there are men and women within the Black Walls who have devoted their lives to studying all that they can about dragons. They were more than warmounts, you see, no matter how much the singers here might say that they were used as tools."

His voice softened.

"They were friends, as well," he added. "You see, when a dragon died - in battle or otherwise - they were always carried back to the Fourteen Flames. No matter how far away it might be or how large the dragon, they were always brought back to the place where they had first came into the world. You see, we Valyrians believe that our gods are in the ground."

"Like the First Men?" she said, explaining for herself. "My father always told me the gods are in the ground, the trees and the rivers, but mother says they're watching from above."

"Similar, but not quite," Vaenyris said with understanding. "Ours are deep underground, and dragons were always thought to be their gift to us, so when they died they were brought back to the flame from which they had hatched, adorned with all the gifts and honors of their service, then cast inside and returned to the fire from whence they came."

"And now they are gone," she said.

"And now they are gone," he echoed, sadness in his voice for but a moment before he cheered himself. "Still, if any man or woman within the Black Walls was to hatch dragons again, Volantis would be theirs to command. Dragonriders had the blessing of the Fourteen to be able to do what they did. To have someone bring dragons into the world again..."

"...but that is of no consequence," he sighed, turning over the cover and flipping to the first page. "Dragons are gone, and they won't be coming back."

"How can you be so sure?" he said, trying to raise his spirits again, as much as out of politeness as it was out of a hope to cheer the Citizen she had saddened. "Maybe someone will come along and do it? Maybe it will be you?"

"No," he said, a sad smile on his cheeks. "I placed my hopes in the unlikely and the unnatural once before, and all it brought was blood and tears. Never again."

"What happened?" she asked, unable to help herself. ""

"My failure cost the lives of everyone that I ever cared about and loved, for a single brief moment of thinking that I was more important to the world than I truly was," he said with a somber voice, all the happiness leaving him in an instant, all the joy, all replaced by quiet melancholy that seemed to make the entire world turn dark and sad. "It was a fool's action. I was a fool for believing in it, but I had believed it in all the same, and they died. My wife. My son. My daughter. My father. My mother. All of them."

"Oh, oh gods," she said, seeing as the Valyrian was set to burst into tears. "I am sorry. I never meant to upset you -"
"No, no, it isn't your fault," he said, turning to her again, starting to smile ever so slightly as he forced himself through his grief the way only a man who had gone through it a thousand times before could. "I am the one who made the choice. I am the one responsible for all that happened, and I shall live with that knowledge from this day till my last. It is my fault, my lady. Not yours. I am the one who made the mistake, and thus I am the one to pay the price."

"Good men and good women alike died for my foolishness, for my dream of being a hero," he said at last. "That is one of many things that drove me from my homeland, my lady. The memories..."

He breathed in, then, and sighed.

"Best not to talk of them."

And then something clicked, something about the story he was telling her, something about the way he spoke, and she looked to him...and saw the lines on his face, the beautiful lines of any who bore the Valyrian look, yes, but familiar somehow.

It was the eyes. Songs had been written with lyrics about those sad eyes.

"Are...are you -"

"Rhaegar Targaryen?" he asked, quiet.

She nodded...and then he laughed.

"Rhaegar Targaryen has been dead for fourteen years, my lady," he said with a wide smile. "We look similar, yes, for all Valyrians have silver hair and violet eyes, we might even be so distantly related in the past that we share a face as well, but we aren't the same. I assure you that. I am alive and well and he is dead."

Sansa laughed, then rising from the ground. "I'm sorry, it was a silly idea."

"But a funny one!" he laughed again. "Though it would be best not to tell the king or anyone else it, lest they start thinking that I truly am Rhaegar Targaryen. I won't be much help to Robb's studies then."

"I won't say anything," she said with a smile. "But you do look a lot like him, or what the singers say he looks like at least."

"It is my hair, isn't it?" he asked, curious about what made him look like the prince. "It is strange, you know. In Volantis, long hair is a man's thing. It shows his seniority, his age, his power, for young men wouldn't have had the time to let it grow and warriors would have had it cut to fit their helms. Here, short hair is the norm."

He shook his head, and she laughed.

"Sansa?" Domeric said, stepping into the godswood, dressed in his normal clothes again. "Where are you?"

"I'm here," she said with a smile as she walked over to her beloved, leaving the Free Citizen to read in peace.
"I was starting to wonder where you had ran off to," he said with a smile, giving his beloved a gentle hug. "Did you find -"

And then there was a soft, quiet bark, and she looked to her side to see her pup emerging from a burrow that the shewolf had dug for her pups, nestled safely besides an ironwood tree, thick grey fur muddied ever so slightly and yellow eyes filled with joy to see her again, the tiny wolf growing all the more excited as it rushed towards it lady's waiting arms.

"There you are!" she laughed, raising the little wolf up to her arms, the shepup licking her cheeks and making her beloved laugh.

"Come on, my lady, we can take her with us," Domeric smiled, reaching out and patting the young wolfess with an open hand, the pup licking his fingers happily. "It'll do her good to not be stuck in the godswood all day."

Sansa laughed, and with that, she placed the young pup down on the ground again, the little lady wolf sitting at her side happily, panting and ready to follow, and so she did, blushing as her beloved took her arm and as they walked out of the godswood together and out into the city, King Robert and her father heading out for a hunt with the boys and the prince and anyone else who was interested, laughing at his japes and dreaming of what might be.

And alone in the godswood with none to see, a prince sobbed.

****

End of Part 22A!

Chapter End Notes

No summary this time, since I had intended this post to be a two parter with the next one, but it's short enough that I don't think it needs one :p

And oh yes, some people's suspicions were true :)

End of Part 22A!
Eddard IV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

****

Not Far From Winterfell...

There was but a light wind within the thick wood, too little to do more than rustle the leaves of the pines and ironwoods and oaks all around, the soft noise muffling the movements of the hunting party...but never for a moment did Eddard loosen the tight grip of his padded hands upon the shaft of his boar spear, looking around with grey eyes, ever vigilant for whatever beasts might be lurking within the dark depths of the forest. There had always been boar in the woods near Winterfell, their meat an ever welcome treat on the table, but there were bears too, black and brown and scarred and strong and with little fear for men after a lifetime of battling against wolves and stags and huntsmen alike, and though there were more than a dozen men there in his party, he refused to let himself lower his guard.

The Vale had taught him that. The clansmen knew how to keep their movements quiet in the hills and rocky forests of the Mountains of the Moon, and they had all the clumsiness of men - how quiet could a direwolf move, when its instincts told it exactly where it place its paws with its each and every step, how to make the least amount of noise whilst sneaking upon unsuspecting prey? The direwolf might well have been the symbol of his line and his wife and children might well have direwolves of their own, but more Starks than he had fingers had died hunting, and more than a few of those had been slew by direwolves when they allowed their belief that the symbol of their house would never harm a Stark to overcome their caution. Even Targaryens and the dragonlords of the old Freehold had made that error, as so many of the dragonseeds had during the Dance of the Dragons, all believing that their blood would be enough to protect them from the wroth of a dragon only to be engulfed in their flame.

He wouldn't make the same mistake.

"Aye, something's been through here not long ago," the king said, crouching down in his hard wearing boiled leathers, examining the small imprint of tracks on the soft, muddy earth, eyes following them to a small plant, Ser Barristan Selmy and Ser Arys Oakheart, honest men both, stood at his side with their white cloaks folded upwards to stop any game from being scared off by the sight. "Hoofed, and not too big, either. Probably a young boar or something around that size, no more than three or four years old."

He waved his heir over, using his finger to point to the leaves of the undergrowth. "Notice that?"

Joffrey looked down, uncertain, trying to see what Robert was showing him, revealing the powerful hunting crossbow on his back for all to see.

The king smiled. "Look at the leaves. They've been flattened, see? And it rained before dawn, but there's no damp on them."

"What *dosh* that mean, *vather*?" the crown prince asked, his words made wrong by the maester's stitches in his tongue.

"When an animal brushes past something it takes the water with it," Robert said to his heir with a
smile, rising to his feet once more. "And that means they moved past here not long ago, aye, and flattened plants spring up again not long after."

"Well spotted, your grace," the young Oakheart knight said with a smile.

"Are you zhure?"

"Your father could hunt anything in the woods of the Vale, man or beast," Eddard said to the prince with a quiet voice, careful not to be overheard by whatever animals might still be lurking in the woods.

"I might not have a head for sums or know how to play a harp," Robert grinned. "But this is something I know. We can't be more than an hour off, mayhaps closer if there be food or water near."

"We best move quickly," the Lord of Winterfell said to his friend with a smile. "Else we won't be back in time for the servants to do it for dinner."

"And those wives of ours will be wondering where we are, too," Robert laughed, resting his spear against his shoulder the way a pikeman might his weapon before tipping his head towards the front and walking with broad, certain steps, utterly confident in his ability to cross the rough land beneath him as the brown of his leathers made him blend in with the trees and earth. "Come on, we best be moving."

Eddard followed, and so did the Kingsguard and Joffrey and Jory and all the others of their small party of guards, but it was Theon Greyjoy who most paid attention to, the king having made it known to the Lord of Winterfell that he he had to be there on the hunt so that he might have a chance to see what he could do...and it was he that Robert allowed to take the lead, him and Joffrey, two young men leading their elders so that they might have a chance to see how much they had learnt, to see where they could improve, and it gave Robert a chance to speak with him in the rear, with none other than Barristan Selmy and Jory close by.

"You look like you're worried about being had by an ice spider," Robert smiled.

"I am just being cautious, Robert," he said with a smile of his own. "You know how these hunts of ours tended to go in the Vale."

"Aye, only this time there's no clansmen in the woods," Robert said. "Nothing much to be worried about in these woods."

"Mayhaps so, but those pups needed a father," he reasoned. "We found the mother, but not him. He has to be around here still somewhere."

"You think there might be a direwolf in the woods?" the king asked, curious. "Are you certain?"

"She couldn't have made it past the Wall with pups inside her. He has to be south of the Wall, somewhere."

"The North's nearly the same size as the other kingdoms put together, Ned," Robert said with a clap of Eddard's shoulder. "If he's out here, he'll never find us."

"I hope so," he said, allowing himself a jape. "They said fully grown direwolves could take on
Robert laughed again, taking a deep breath of the crisp Northern air. "Gods! I missed hunting with you, Ned! This is how it should be! We shouldn't be in our damned castles, letting our youth pass us by. We should be out here, in the woods, hunting whilst we can still do it well!"

"My youth left me a while ago, your grace," Eddard answered, "I've got gray hairs."

"Aye, but you were never young, Ned," Robert smiled. "I swear, Jon Arryn must've wondered if your father had shown up at the Eyrie instead of you."

It was Eddard's turn to laugh, then, and he did. It had been fourteen years since the end of the Rebellion, fourteen long years since he had gone north with a wife and a newborn son and Robert had gone south to his new seat with a wife and a kingdom, and it had been another eight years since the two had last seen one another during the siege of Pyke, where the Storm King had proven that the Ironborn's fear of flash and thunder was well placed when he lead the men into the breach in the castle's walls. That was almost a decade ago, and it made Eddard realize how much he had missed Robert's words and japes and courage, the three things that made men willing to follow their king into the depths of hell on his command, as they had done at the Trident...

"I think about it too, sometimes," Robert said quietly, knowing in an instant what Eddard was thinking without a word needing to be said. "I nearly died on that damned river, and gods know what would have happened if we lost that battle. Tywin might've marched on Riverrun rather than King's Landing -"

"All the more reason to thank the gods Old and New for the victory," he said solemnly before the king finished, not wanting to bear the thought of what might have happened.

Robert nodded with a silent understanding, knowing that his friend wanted not to speak about it. "Have you given any thought to my offer, yet?"

"I'm still thinking about it," he said truthfully.

"Your sons and their friends want to come south, and that Sansa of yours and her love, too," Robert reasoned. "There'd be no harm in letting them see King's Landing and the south, and it'd be easier to keep an eye on them if you're in the south as well..."

"...and if you're in the south, you might as well be my Hand," Robert laughed.

"So I would be doing right by my sons and my daughters to come south with you," he sighed...

...before allowing himself a small smile, remembering his own years in the south, in the Vale of Arryn, and how good and innocent they had been, when father and Brandon and Lyanna had all been but a raven away. His sons and daughters were part Tully and Robb would be expected to come south with a host if there was ever a war that placed Riverrun in peril, and that meant that he would have to know as much as possible about how to act in the south and how to do his mother's side of the family right with his actions. Such knowledge had helped him a great deal in the Rebellion, when all the other lords of the North were in a land where things were similar enough to be familiar yet different enough to be all the more confusing because of it, and in some ways, that knowledge might very well have been credited with bringing them their victory in both war and peace. It was the understanding of Andal law and Andal traditions that his foster father had made sure he learnt during his time in the Vale that had been the greatest aid, for it had told him that the
southrons placed less value on betrothals than Northmen, that it was not uncommon for a bride to meet her groom for the first time on the day of their wedding in stark contrast to the many meetings that were expected in the North to ensure that both sides were comfortable with the union ahead of them before being carried off to the wedding bed...and that had told him that Lord Hoster Tully had no desire to wait for any sense of a mourning period before finding his daughter another groom.

It was a wise decision in hindsight, as it had brought the great majority of the Riverlords over to the rebel banner, even if those in the south east - the Darrys and the Whents - had risen for the Iron Throne instead, for it had surely shaved many months off the war and saved countless thousands of lives that would otherwise have been lost.

But it was a decision that he could have only made with an understanding of how things were in the south, and what better way could his sons and daughters be taught such matters than if they were to visit the south for themselves for a while and see the differences with their own eyes?

"I know what you're trying to do, Robert," he laughed to himself. "You're trying to get them to convince me to go south with you."

"Aye," the king answered with a japing voice. "Is it working?"

"Aye," Eddard answered with Robert's own word and a smile. "I will think about it, Robert. The North's a busy realm, one that depends on Winterfell for guidance. I cannot leave it on a whim. But it won't fall apart if I leave it for a while."

"So long as you're thinking about it, I'm happy," Robert smiled. "We'll make Jon proud."

"...how was he?" Eddard asked, thinking about his foster father. "Before he died?"

"It was the strangest thing I've ever seen," Robert sighed. "I've seen men die, Ned, from all sorts of things, on the battlefield and off it from poxes or bad bellies. You know what it's like. But Jon...seven hells! Before he died it was like he had become young again with how much work and travelling he was doing and then one day he was on his deathbed. I've never seen a man fall ill so fast, and definitely not Jon. He was made from iron."

Robert sighed then, sad.

"He called me to his side, aye, and that wife of his too and their son, and he kept saying the same words over and over," Robert said. "The seed is strong. Again and again, it was all he could say. I thought he might have been trying to give Lysa some words for their son, trying to say that he was from a strong line..."

"...but I thought about it a lot on the way here, Ned, and I'm not so sure," Robert said quietly, stepping over to Eddard's side, as close as he might get.

"What do you mean?" Eddard asked.

"That Lysa has the same red hair as your Catelyn and your sons do, and Jon Arryn was blonde like a Lannister when he was young," Robert said quietly before asking, "So why does Robert Arryn have dark hair?"

"You think Lysa might have given him horns?" Eddard asked with surprise. "Robert, we have to do something if that's so, we cannot allow a bastard to sit in the Eyrie -"
"Aye, I know," Robert said quickly, cutting him off. "She fled the city before I started north to Winterfell, hells, she fled so fast she left half of her and Jon Arryn's things, and the more I think about it the more I think she might've realized that Jon Arryn found out."

"And that would explain why Jon Arryn fell ill so fast."

"You think she murdered him? With poison?" the Lord of Winterfell asked, stunned for a moment at the thought his foster father had been slain by his lady wife before regaining his composure. "How can you be so sure?"

"I think Jon Arryn realized that her son didn't look like their "father" or their mother, and that'd explain why he was looking at that book by Malleon," Robert said bluntly, "No doubt he was trying to find out if anyone on his side of the family had brown hair that might've skipped a generation and gone into that boy, only for Lysa to realize she'd been caught and poison him."

"I won't let her get away with this, Ned," he finished, a simmering anger beginning to boil beneath the king's warm, friendly surface. "I'll die before I allow a falseborn bastard to steal Jon Arryn's seat and the Vale."

"And neither will I," Eddard said, his friend softening again at his voice. "Winterfell has a raven for the Royces at Runestone that could carry a message to the Bronze Yohn. Starks and Royces are cousins and my father saw fit to have a raven trained to send a message there because of it."

"The Bronze Yohn?" Robert asked, reaching to his hard, clean shaven chin for a moment, thinking. "Aye, he's a good man, and true. Write a letter to him when we return from the hunt, Ned, and I'll stamp it with my signet ring and sign it myself. She won't be able to make a fight of it. The Vale loved Jon."

"But what about the boy?" Eddard asked with concern as he stepped over a gnarled root.

He remembered King's Landing, the broken bodies of children concealed beneath the cloaks. It was Lannister work, a cruel necessity of war, but still cruel, so immeasurably cruel.

"He's frail and sickly, from what I hear," Robert said. "Once he's renounced his claim on the Vale, he won't be no threat. Only a fool would try and place a boy with a broken body on a throne. He can go to the Faith if they'll have him."

"Your grace, my lord," Theon said quietly as the rest of the men hunched low to the ground, a grim frown on his face as it often was. "We've found it."

Robert grinned then, striding to the front of the group with boar spear in hand, and it was then that the smell struck Eddard's nose, thick and heavy. Blood. Gripping his spear tightly he pushed forward through the rest of the group, waving the armored Jory over to the front before turning his attentions to the king who dropped to one knee at the front of the group.

"Or what's left of it," Robert said...

...and Eddard looked to the front to see a large, muscular bear, a massive thing of brown fur matted with blood fresh and old, scarred from a lifetime of battles against wolves and boar and other bears, cleverly using its deadly claws to rip at the carcass of the young boar before it, tearing stubborn hunks of pork from the thick bones and plucking steaming organs from the body, picking and
choosing the parts that it liked the most the way a lord at feast might cut out of the best parts of a freshly roasted goose.

It was a monster of an animal, a brute that they might have lacked the numbers to deal with, but Robert only smiled, waving his son and heir over to his side as the mighty bear busied itself with its meal, the king giving his son directions without so much as a single word being said, but with a point of his hand towards his back and a gesture towards the bear's front shoulder. The prince, nodding with understanding and grinning at his chance to prove himself in his father's eyes for the second time in the day took the crossbow from his back, pressing it against his shoulder, aiming with narrowed eyes, but before he could fire Eddard tapped his shoulder and gestured in utter silence to Theon and Jory and the rest of the party but for the Kingsguard knights, pointing towards a clearing on the left, the prince nodding and waiting as the others moved...

...and when they were in place, spears ready and Theon's bow nocked and ready for the draw, the prince fired.

The masterwork Myrish crossbow let loose its quarrel with a deep, billowing *thrum*.

The bear answered with a high pitched yelp of pain and surprise, the steel bolt striking true and punching deep into the thick shoulder, burying itself halfway up the shaft in iron muscle and striking the bone within and mayhaps even damaged the joint itself and crippled the beast. It was a strong hit, a good hit, but no single crossbow bolt would ever be able to bring down so great an animal with a single hit, no, and the bear swung round and *roared* with all its might, a deafening howl that was the closest any sound had ever come to the noises he had heard on the Trident fourteen years before.

Yet even with fangs dripping blood and deadly claws that could either pierce the protection the men of the party or strike with such force as to make it irrelevant, the bear hesitated, stepping towards the king and the Stark and the prince before letting out a pained whine as it tried to move its wounded shoulder. Turning to its wounded shoulder, it tried to pull the bolt out between its fangs, tried to remove the source of its pain, tried to free itself to be able to attack and wipe the lot of them out -

"Now!" Robert howled, bolting to his feet, spear in hand. "Joffrey, stay with Arys! Selmy, Stark, with me!"

"Keep its attention!" the Lord of Winterfell commanded to Jory and his guards. "It can't fight all of us at once!"

"Come on you sorry lot!" Jory shouted to the others. "For Winterfell!"

"For Winterfell!"

The immobilized bear looked to them with all the hate and rage and fury it could muster, but for a heartbeat Eddard saw fear in its black eyes as the party closed in from the front and from the left, flailing at them with its massive limbs and growling with every movement, the bloody wound it had received forcing it to limp towards them rather than charge...and unable to close the distance with any of them, the huntsmen were free to stab and prod with their boar spears.

But even wounded, even nearly immobile, the animal was far from defenseless. Boar spears were short and heavy, best at allowing the momentum of one's prey to gore itself upon its tip than for thrusting, poorly suited for use against so large an animal...and one with a reach that brought it dangerously close to the faces of the men that had to get into arm's reach to strike it.
Too close.

Eddard moved around to the side with short side steps, keeping his eyes on the bear's long and deadly claws, but one of the men-at-arms grew too confident in the animal's pain, believing the sweet lie that its pain had clouded its vision and made it confused and unaware of its enemies, and it caught him. With a bang like hammer striking anvil, the maul like paw of the bear's good arm crashed into the side of his helm, claws scratching the metal as they rolled off with a spark before the man crashed to the ground, alive but dazed. It was only thanks to the helmet and the padded underlayer that the blow hadn't killed him then and there, and it was only Robert sprinting around to the wounded shoulder and striking the quarrel with the blunt of his spear that stopped the bear from being able to grab him by the ankles and pull him into a vicious mauling before Jory could drag him out as the bear cried out again in agony.

And when the bear's pain subsided enough that it could snap its attentions to the king with a hateful gaze, Robert was not so blood drunk as to think he could take a bear on in a melee, leaping back just in time for the bear's claws to only smash the shaft of his weapon between his hands and not claw his middle. Growling furiously, seemingly unhindered by the dozens of strikes and having still more blood to bleed, the bear reached round to its wounded shoulder and tore the bolt out between its teeth, spitting it out onto the ground before placing a claw on the earth and beginning to advance towards the disarmed king, Robert moving as fast as he can, dodging, his every movement needing to be exactly right, to be perfect, less the bear strike him true and kill him then and there.

But as the bear moved, as Eddard's own spear sank into the fatty flesh of the bear's side, he saw Theon, bow at the ready, no more than ten feet away, aiming for the bear's haunches...

...and when he let loose, he did so with deadly precision, striking both of the things that made the bear male with a single arrow.

Its eyes went wide.

Then it let out a screech that shook the forest as its legs simply crumbled beneath it, the hunting party cheering loudly as the bear crashed to the ground, all the fight leaving it...and allowing Robert to climb onto its back as it let out a pained whimper before he crouched down and sank the sharp tip of his broken spear into the back of its neck at the exact place it joined with the head, quickly driving the hard steel into the soft flesh as he locked his left arm under the jaw for grip.

A heartbeat later the eyes that were filled with bestial rage were still. The battle was won, and the hunt was done.

The king stood with a foot atop the fallen bear's head, the sound of his laughter booming through the trees, grinning just as he had grinnnd in all their hunts in the Vale and looking as though he had become twenty years younger again...but then the laughter began to turn to pain, and the king staggered away from the slain bear, leaning on a tree for support as he groaned, wincing and clenching his fists, Ser Barristan Selmy sprinting to his side as fast as his legs might carry him.

"Your grace!" the Lord Commander said with a horrified voice. "Are you -"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Robert said, panting for breath before letting out a laugh again as he looked to the friend who walked towards him with true concern. "I pulled a muscle is all. I'm not as young as I used to be, Ned, so don't look at me like that!"

"Jon Arryn was fine before he died," Eddard said grimly, the laughter fading from his friend's eye
with solemn understanding. "We best return to Winterfell before the sun sets."

"I'll agree with you on that," Robert said, gesturing towards the bear with a tired hand. "We can't take the whole body, it's too big, but I'll be damned if we don't take proof. The head'll do."

"Jory!" Eddard said, turning his attentions to the captain of his guard before flicking his wrist towards the fallen bear. "Take the head."

"It'll take awhile, my lord," Jory said with a smile and a laugh, sitting atop the bear's back as he looked down at the head. "This neck is as thick as a tree trunk."

"I need to rest for a moment anyhow," Robert said, suddenly out of breath. "...that took more out of me than I thought it would..."

"Robert," Eddard said quietly and grimly. "That isn't a pulled muscle."

"Aye, it wasn't," Robert answered honestly and with a voice little higher than a whisper, only Ser Barristan Selmy close enough to hear. "Barristan, the vial."

The Lord Commander stepped close to his king, as close as he might dare, and it was only the fact that Eddard was stood so close to him that allowed him to see the Kingsguard knight reach down to his belts and into a small satchel and pull out one of over a dozen glass phials, filled with a clear liquid that was dotted with thin specks of a thin, purple flower, carefully handing it to the king and using his fingers to hide it from the others. Robert took it quickly so none of the others might have a chance to see it was offered and then he pushed out the cork with the tip of his thumb, letting it fall to the soft earth before raising his hand as if he were to stifle a yawn, downing everything that was within the vial before anyone realized it was in his hand before sliding the glasswork into one of his pockets.

And with his words veiled by the sound of Jory hacking his way through the bear's thick spine, he looked to his friend with uncertain eyes.

"What was that?" he asked. "I've never seen you drink anything -"

"Aye, and you didn't see me drink anything now, Ned," Robert said quietly, his voice turning firm. "And you won't tell anyone what you saw either. Swear it."

"Robert -"

"Not a word," Robert said, entirely serious and using the lordly voice Eddard knew he so rarely used. "The realm depends on it."

"I swear it," Eddard said in honest understanding, bowing before his king and his friend. "Not a word."

"Not even to Catelyn."

"Not even to her," he said.

Robert smiled at him, then, and patted him on the shoulder before laughing, seeming to be gaining his strength again more and more with every second that passed. "Aye, and find somewhere for that head! A prize like that needs a place in the hall!"
"I will," Eddard smiled, happy to see Robert back to his usual self again, Jory laughing as he heaved the head up off the ground and into the arms of his men. "Back to the horses!"

"You heard his lordship!" Jory commanded the guards, soaked in bear blood from the waist down. "To the horses!"

There were a flurry of acknowledgements from the men of the castle, his household guardsmen smiling at the kill and talking amongst themselves as they walked, leaving Robert and Eddard and Barristan at the rear of the group, together, the Lord of Winterfell walking slowly to keep the king's pace.

"Thanks, Ned," Robert smiled, happier than Eddard had ever seen him. "For a fine hunt."

"Anytime, Robert," he said, before letting go of his courtesies and asking what he needed to know. "But what happened, Robert? And what did you drink?"

"Nothing bad," Robert said before sighing. "That blow of his nearly finished me on the Trident, and it's been haunting me ever since. It never healed right."

"His grace has been having pains whenever he does anything too strenuous with his left arm," Ser Barristan explained. "The Grand Maester saw fit to give him something for the pain and to keep the scarring from irritating too much, but sometimes the pain is so great that even that is not enough."

"Aye, Selmy says it true," Robert said at last. "But it must be kept a secret, Ned. I can still ride and I can still fight in the melee and hunt, but I'll be damned if the realm starts to think of me as a cripple. The realm needs a king who can fight. I'm not as young as I used to be, aye, but I can still fight."

"Vather!" Joffrey said with excitement, coming over to his father's side with a wide grin, a smiling Arys not far behind. "I hit it exactly as you taught me!"

"You did," Robert smiled, the king letting out a laugh as the young prince came to his side, the black haired Baratheon placing a hand on his golden haired son's shoulder. "And there's a lesson for you, Joffrey: always aim for the joints if you can. It doesn't matter if you're fighting a man in plate or hunting in the woods. Whatever you are fighting can't do much harm if you stop it from moving any closer."

"Even with my croshbow?"

"Your mother might've wanted you to be using that thing over a hammer and keeping out the melee, but there was never a king on the throne who fought in a battle outside of a siege with a bow, boy," Robert explained to his heir. "Unless you're under siege, you should fight with either a sword or a hammer, and you'll want the latter -"

"Because it's better at killing men in plate than a sword since you only need one hit," the crown prince finished with pride.

"Exactly so!" Robert laughed before lowering his voice. "But don't tell your mother that. I'll make a soldier out of you yet, and it'll help if I don't have to hear her moaning about it."

Joffrey laughed, and Robert mussed his hair. "I'll have to find someone for you to squire for."
"What about you, Lord Sshtark?" Joffrey asked, curious and hopeful.

"You can't be his squire," Robert said. "He's not a knight."

"Your father says it right," Eddard answered warmly. "I could take you on, but I cannot knight you afterwards."

"Your uncle Stannis could," Robert considered. "He'd make a good warrior out of you, aye, and won't go softly because you're the prince. And that's bad, and you shouldn't want that -"

"Unlesh I am a vhucking Targaryen!"

Robert roared with laughter, and even Eddard couldn't help himself, either. "Now that's my boy!"

"Gods! Robert, what have you been teaching him?"

"I'll admit, I wasn't much of a father to him when he was younger," Robert said proudly, squeezing the prince for emphasis. "I've been making up for lost time, Ned, and I've been teaching him everything I know. How to fight is one of them, how to judge people..."

"...and maybe a few curses his mother doesn't know about," the king said innocently. "Cersei doesn't need to know about those, though."

The Lord of Winterfell laughed to himself for a moment, smiling. Earlier, when he had been on his own and when he had been trying to charm Sansa, Eddard couldn't help but think that the crown prince seemed immensely certain of himself, arrogant, dangerously so even, but now, with his father alongside him, he was more his Robb than not. Younger and more excitable, yes, but an honest and kin and friendly young man all the same, one working to mimic his father's legendary charisma and ability to make friends, and the smile faded and left him with a question: was the overconfidence just a veil he had worn to try and impress him and Sansa with his certainty in himself, the way most young men tried to impress women with their confidence, or was the reverse true and that was the true Joffrey, with the smiling and eager boy he saw besides him now just a facade he made for his father's sake? Or maybe both of them held a piece of the truth, and the crown prince could at times be both arrogant and proudful, only for him to love his father so much so that it brought the good out in him?

Mayhaps...but Robert would surely have mentioned it, and either way, it would be difficult for even Eddard's own father to be able to know whether the boy was true or false when his words were so ruined by Domic's strike.

"I won't say a word," Eddard said after a brief silence to think.

"Ned and I have to speak about lordly matters," Robert said to the prince, tapping him on the back. "Go to Arys."

There was no hesitation from the prince, not even a moment of asking a question to know why they were being sent away like Robb might do to him, only a smile and a nod before the crown prince walked towards the white cloak at the head of the group, telling him that his father had sent him to the knight and little more than that.

"Gods, to think that boy was a right cunt a few years ago," Robert laughed to himself. "That mother of his never wanted me around, but look! Just a few talks every now and then and he comes out
good."

Then, almost abruptly, Robert looked to Theon. "So how's the squid been, Ned? He hasn't been much trouble?"

"He's quiet," Eddard Stark said. "I had hoped for a time that he and Robb would grow close like brothers, give a chance to mend the bad blood between the North and the Isles, but Theon didn't know how things are done in the North and taunted Jon."

"Your bastard?" Robert asked, seeing the reaction on Eddard's face before shrugging. "It's not like I don't have a couple myself, Ned. Go on."

"It poisoned things between them," Eddard explained. "The others haven't been willing to forget it, either. He's an outsider here, and Northmen have little love for"

"So he's a squid out of water, eh?" Robert asked, Eddard only able to smile at the pun. "So long as he isn't any trouble, then that's good enough. Friend or no, if Balon rebels again...you know what you will have to do."

"I know," Eddard said grimly. "But Theon is no threat to Winterfell or any of its people, and with his heir within its walls Balon won't dare to rebel, not when he knows what will become of Theon for it."

"Has he been learning much?" Robert asked before adding. "The Iron Islanders won't have him if he doesn't know how to swing an axe or sail a ship."

"Rodrik tells me he fights well, armed or unarmed," Eddard started. "He's used to having to stand on his own, without allies, and it shows when he trains. He likes to fight more than one at a time -"

"Like that uncle of his, then?" Robert asked, eying the Greyjoy as they walked through the woods. "Victarion?" the Lord of Winterfell asked. "Aye."

"A dangerous man," Robert said quietly and with an edge of true, warrior's respect. "He was one of the few who might've been able to take me in my prime. He has a warrior's cunning, that one."

"He does and his nephew seems to share it," Eddard continued. "But he's best of all with a bow, you saw that for yourself just."

"He shot that bear through both balls with one arrow, didn't he?" Robert laughed. "Remind me not to go near that ward of yours whenever he has a bow. Has he tried going to a tourney?"

"Not yet, but he would win if he did," Eddard reasoned. "He's better with a bow than I am -"

"That's not much of a boast, Ned," Robert japed. ", and he's better than you, Robert."

Robert laughed then, and the Lord of Winterfell laughed with him. "It looks like you've made a fighter out of him, Ned," Robert smiled. "But he has to know ships as well, and Winterfell is in the middle of the North. A squid who can't swim is a dead squid. They'll
never have him if he can't sail."

"Aye," Eddard agreed. "I've been thinking of sending him to White Harbour, let the Manderlys teach him about ships, or the Seastarks, mayhaps. Not the Darkstarks, though. They're too close to the isles, close enough he could break out."

"Might be best to have him boating on a lake," Robert suggested with a shrug. "No way he can escape that way."

"I thought about that as well for a time," Eddard nodded with understanding. "But the waters are too calm on a lake for it to be the same. He has to sail on the seas if he's going to learn how to sail."

"Might be I could have him sent to Stannis," Robert suggested. "He can sail, and he's got that smuggler of his to teach him if he can't...and he won't escape from Dragonstone, I'll tell you that."

"Is Stannis not at King's Landing anymore?" Eddard asked, confused. "I thought he was Master of Ships?"

"He fled back to Dragonstone not long before Jon Arryn died," the king said with a sigh. "I haven't a clue what he's doing now..."

...then he smiled slyly. "Varys says he's in touch with some Essosi wench, though. Might be that brother of mine found himself a mistress and doesn't want the court to know about it."

"I have only met your brother a few times," Eddard spoke as he thought of Robert's brother as he had been at Harrenhal for the tourney and again for the Greyjoy Rebellion. "He doesn't seem the sort of man to keep a mistress."

"Nor does Renly seem the sort of man to bed a woman before marriage," Robert said with a small smile. "He's a little too fond of Ser Loras Tyrell and his sister, and Varys tells me he pays more than a few visits to the Tyrell tents when she's there for her brother in the tourneys."

"Does anyone else know that you know?"

"Not that I know," Robert said. "But he'll probably marry her soon enough as well and about time, too. That brother of mine needs some sons of his own if he's going to keep the Stormlands safe, and the Tyrell girl is fine enough for it. I would've thought about seeing if I could get her for Joff if it wasn't for Renly."

"It might be best for you to encourage him, then," Eddard suggested. "Before anyone else learns that he's taken her maidenhood."

"Something to mention when I go south again, as if I didn't have enough already," Robert laughed. "Still, I wouldn't mind seeing if I couldn't find a bride for Joffrey whilst I'm up here."

"You saw the duel, Robert," Eddard said softly. "Domeric defeated the prince fairly, and I won't force one of my daughters to marry someone that they do not wish to."

"Aye, but you've got two daughters, Ned," Robert smiled. "Might be your Arya will take a liking to him, aye, and if what Sansa says is true, being queen would suit her well enough."

Eddard narrowed his eyes.
"Did she truly tell you such things?" he asked.

"Aye, she did," Robert said more carefully, aware of the Stark's change in mood. "It was simple talk, Ned. Was she not meant to?"

"I would hope my daughters don't try to find husbands for one another, no," Eddard said more firmly before softening. "As for Arya...the choice would be hers to make. I will not make it for her."

"I am not asking for a betrothal, Ned," the king soothed. "Only a chance for the two to get to know one another better, so they might know if they want to be betrothed. Nothing more."

"Joffrey is free to talk to her whenever she wants," Eddard said, leaving no room for discussion of the matter. "If I hear from her that she wants him to leave her alone, though, I would ask you to make sure he does."

"Fair enough, Ned!" Robert smiled, the sight calming Eddard again. "That's enough for me, and him, too. I'll make sure he knows not to push her or anything of the sort, but from what I hear of her, the will get along well."

"You truly think so?" Eddard asked, intrigued. If Arya did like Joffrey...then his lady wife would certainly be happy, to say the least, and so would he.

"Aye, I do," he answered with a nod. "My Joffrey likes to hunt, and from what I hear so does your Arya. He would probably take her hunting with him."

"Truly?" Eddard asked with amazement. Arya was always going to have trouble finding a husband that might tolerate her adventures around the castle, but to have the prince himself do so...the thought was tempting.

It might very well be the best match she could possibly ask for.

"Truly," Robert answered with nothing but absolute certainty. "I raised my son well, Ned. He'll treat his lady with the respect she deserves and nothing less, I swear it to you Ned. You know I don't lie."

"I know you're terrible at it," Eddard smiled. "I'll tell her what I think of the offer, but the choice will be hers to make and no one else's still."

"Aye, good enough to be sure," Robert said with an understanding nod. "And that's enough about such matters for a day...gods, I missed talking with you, Ned. I should have came here years ago, when Jon was still here. He'd have loved a chance to see your sons."

"He would have," Eddard agreed with a somber silence between the two for a moment. "He wouldn't want us to dwell on him, Robert. He hated mourning."

"He hated having nothing to do," Robert said with a sigh. "Always was like him to never take a break. It was the stillbirths and miscarriages that caused it, we both know it, he never wanted to dwell on the thoughts of it all."

"So it was," Eddard nodded. "He deserved better."

"He did," Robert sighed. "We'll make her pay, Ned, I swear it even if I have to lead the men up the
Lance and throw her out the Moon Door myself. Gods only know what she's doing at the Eyrie now, but she won't be doing it for long, I tell you that."

"And then we can deal with the Targaryens, once and for all," Robert said firmly.

"They're no danger to us, Robert," Eddard reasoned. "They have no lands or coin to back them."

"They said the same thing about the Blackfyres, but that didn't stop them from coming back with an army half a dozen times," Robert countered. "The Iron Throne won't be safe till they're gone, Ned. And you'er wrong about them not having any coin."

"Have they made an alliance with someone?"

"Varys brings me news from across the Narrow Sea. He has a spy over there with them. A sellsword," the king explained. "The beggar prince wed his sister in the manse of a Pentoshi magister and got more gifts than I got at my wedding to Cersei, not to mention knights."

"Men have came to his side?" Eddard asked, astonished. "I thought Jon soothed over the loyalist houses?"

"Aye, so did I, but it seems not all of them were reasonable enough to listen," Robert said. "It only takes one spark to light up a fire. If two knights come to his side, then there might be two thousand more waiting for the banners to rise before declaring their loyalty to him, and who knows how many more might join them for the plunder or because they think the wrong side won the Rebellion."

"But if he married his sister, then he has hurt his cause," Eddard explained to his king. "She would have been his best chance to make an alliance, and for himself, too. He could have had the Martell heiress as his bride."

"Aye, that was an error for the sisterfucker," Robert said. "Years of inbreeding to keep the blood pure seems to have addled his wits, but even an inbred fool can be dangerous with a wise man behind him. Whoever paid for his wedding is the one we should be looking for, and I'll have Varys look into it when I return to King's Landing."

"And that's why I need you at King's Landing, Ned," the king sighed as they emerged into the clearing where their horses were kept, the master of horse's son, Harwin, stood tending to the steeds just as he was guarding them with half a dozen others. "There's a war coming. I don't know where and I don't know when, but it is coming."

"And when it does, I'll need a strong and honest man at my side," Robert said, climbing atop his steed as his squire, Lancel, brought it forth. "King's Landing doesn't have many of them these days."

"I will do what I can, Robert," Eddard said truthfully and with an understanding. "But I can't promise you anything. The North needs nearly as much management as the rest of the realms. Taxes, trade, disputes, it all comes to Winterfell, and that is something Robb isn't ready for. Not unless I know for certain that Catelyn and the others will be there at his side to guide him till he can stand on his own."

"Then let's hope for the sake of our sons, yours and mine, that she agrees," Robert said at last with a knowing nod towards Eddard. "If a war comes, it'll be them who are marching on the front."

"May that day never come," Eddard said grimly before urging his horse onwards...
...and with that, they started back towards Winterfell, and but for a few words where Robert and he discussed the words they would need to place in the letter to ensure that the Lords of the Vale knew their orders came from their king and knew what needed to be done, nothing more was said, for all Eddard could think about was the bloody battles of the Rebellion come again, of the agonized cries of dying horses and the sobs and shouts and screams of dying men, of strong and brave Denys Arryn's tears streaming down his cheeks as he begged Eddard not to let him die at Stoney Sept. He could remember it all. How he had tried to staunch the open artery with his cloak, tying it tight and shut only to look up and see his eyes frozen still, the light and life already gone by the time he was done, of how little he weighed when Eddard pulled him from the water where Jon Connington had left him to die.

But more than anything else he could remember the face he had learnt to recognize at the Eyrie, the young Denys raised at his side. He had been young. He had a wife who wrote to him often to tell him about their newborn son.

But when he closed his eyes, for even a moment, he saw Robb in his place, his red hair soaked with sweat and water and his cheeks shining with dying tears.

For the sake of his family ee would do anything to stop that from ever happening, anything, all to stop a repeat of the slaughter.

And as the gates of Winterfell loomed above to welcome their lord home, he turned to the friend who had found him with Denys' broken body in his arms.

"My mind is made up, Robert."

"Is it?"

"I will be your Hand. For their sake."

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End of Part 23!

Chapter End Notes

Whew! :D

I'd like to be able to write a summary for this one, but its a bit late in the day for me to do it, so I'll just end this here and say that the next PoV will be an Arya one, with a bit of a time skip covering the rest of Robert's stay at Winterfell since the show must go on, and then we'll have a Viserys PoV.

Also, a brief correction thanks to a reader, but Arya is actually nine, not eight. Whoops! :P
The manses within the fortified breast of the Black Walls of Volantis were large and sprawling places, lavishly decorated and lavishly built and lavishly furnished in equal measure, yet even they were not as large as the one that Illyrio Mopatis had called his own. Such palaces were exactly that, palaces, as much a statement and display of wealth and power as they were a place to live, tens to hundreds of bedchambers that stayed empty at all times of year, yet kept clean and tidy for guests that would never come, maintained solely as an instrument of boasting. Viserys Targaryen could never feel comfortable in such a place, so soulless and empty...but this manse felt different, comfortable, *homely*, for although the dining room he sat within now was not nearly as large as the one that had been the host to his and his sister's wedding but a moon or before, it reminded him of something far more special.

It reminded him of the Red Keep. It reminded him of that small room from the Targaryen's youth where he might eat with his mother and his father and his brother and all the others, a room fit to sit no more than ten, a place for them on those days that the Red Keep wasn't home to a feast. It had been a small chamber, less regal than the Great Hall, less grand, a place where they might drop the facades of royalty for a time and be themselves. His father's japes and stories of the War of the Ninepenny Kings, where he managed to find and kill a Blackfyre standard bearer and tried to bring the banner back to camp as a trophy, only to be nearly shot off his horse by a Martell who thought him to be a Blackfyre himself. His good sister's weary sighs as Rhaegar came to the table with a book in his hand and placed it besides his plate, absentmindedly picking at the plate as he focused on his reading, sometimes even stabbing at thin air with his knife before realizing there was nothing there.

He remembered all of that, even though it was before his sister-wife was born. He remembered it even though his father had been dead for fourteen years, ran through the back by the Lannister who was sworn to keep him safe. He remembered it even though his brother had been dead for fourteen years, his head crushed by Robert Baratheon's warhammer, despite how the two had met at Harrenhal the year before and laughed and japed and met one another as cousins might do.

That was why it felt so comfortable here.

It reminded him of home. *Home*. His real home. Not the place in Braavos where the good Ser Willem Darry had helped to keep him safe, nor any of the manses they had visited only to be turned out into the streets at nights end, nor even the Pentoshi's manse where he had been wed and mayhaps fathered a child with his sister-wife. His real home.

Westeros.

His sister had never seen it and knew it only from the tales that he had told her of it - endless fields of green, towering castles that were as beautiful as they were strong, a safe land where one needn't fear being slaughtered by Dothraki or captured by Magisters or countless other fates that might've befallen them in their exile....but one day, one day soon, he would make sure that she had the chance to see it for herself and know that she was home. To know that the child she may very well be
carrying even now would not need to grow up in a world filled with fear and fright, but safe, safe within the walls of the Red Keep and surrounded by dragon banners that soared in the winds with pride again. He would make sure it happened. He had to. Who else could bring a family that had existed for millenia back from the brink in its darkest hour than he, the last son of the last family of dragonlords left in the world, a family that had outlasted the Ghiscari Empire, the Rhoynish city states and the dragons themselves? Who else could take on the work of restoring the Targaryens to their rightful place atop of Westeros, and bring the dragon soaring back to prominence? His sister? She was too gentle hearted, too full of love for all the people of the world, the very trait that would make her a magnificent queen making her unable to do what must be done to see them return to Westeros, not in chains, but with an army.

Those were the thoughts that filled Viserys' mind as plates came and went before him, covered in dishes that he had never encountered before, not in Pentos at the table of the portly Illyrio Mopatis, not in Braavos where peoples beyond counting had melted together into one, not even in Westeros or at Dragonstone where the echo of the Freehold still resounded across the walls, a faint reminder of the glory that had been. They were plates of Volantene food. They were plates of Valyrian food, the fare of Triarchs and Lords Freeholder and Freeholder alike. It was no true feast, for Valyrians did not feast. That was an Andal thing, a thing of the First Men, a Westerosi thing, where thousands might sit in attendance and have near a hundred plates a person, sampling once with their forks and guzzling wine as though it were water. Valyrian banquets were smaller fare, some two dozen guests, but more intimate for it, more friendly, filled with discussion and debate rather than senseless drinking, with but a few courses intended to be eaten utterly rather than merely sampled...a legacy of the days before Valyria was a city, before the Freehold, when they were simply shepherds on the slopes of the Fourteen Flames, where every meal was to be treasured.

But let none say that they did not put care into their cookery. This dinner was a dinner of four courses, and each and every one was cooked to perfection. A beet soup, served cool, as thick and rich as violet honey and served with a glass of spiced wine hot enough to steam. A fish, carefully filleted to remove any bones and scales and fried on a pan with olive oil and served with a sauce of garlic and wine and lime juice, accompanied by dumplings and roasted carrots. The ancestral and iconic Valyrian fire pudding of raisins and sultanas and other fruits and suet, brought forth and set ablaze at the table, as brilliant a spectacle now as it had been millenia before when it was first concocted. Through all three courses they had spoken about all manner of things - the weather, the city, how life had been in Westeros and other casual topics - but when the last plates were taken away by Laena's cook servant, when they returned with a platter of cheeses and crackers and fruit, the conversation came alive proper.

And it was far more serious than the simpler talk of before.

"So, how did you find yourselves on the way to Volantis?" Laena asked, curious. "It isn't everyday that a Targaryen makes their way to the city."

"The good Illyrio Mopatis in Pentos had taken us in, and it was his help that brought us here," Viserys said, looking to his sister with a smile before returning his attentions to their Volantene host. "If it weren't for him, we would surely still be there."

"Illyrio? The cheesemonger? Truly?" Laena asked before laughing. "I thought whatever goodwill he had died with that wife of his."

"You knew the magister?"

"Laena knows a lot of magisters around Essos," Tygett said before the woman might answer. "Her
father was of the elephants - the faction of merchantmen in the city - and so she inherited his fleet."

"More than just his fleet," the Volantene smiled. "His warehouses, his workshops, his reserved piers...why, everything a woman with a fleet of forty nine merchant ships might want. And before anyone asks, I make my coin from cloth on the triangle trade."

"...the what?" Daenerys asked.

"I think that might be the phrase for it in the Common Tongue?" Laena asked, thinking before shaking her head. "It's called the hāre kelītīs in High Valyrian. It's a trade route with three stops. You start here in Volantis, picking up dye. Volantis was always a big producer of dye, even before the last of the Rhoynish Wars. Then you sail northwards, all the way up to Lorath and sell that dye and buy velvet. Lorathi velvet is the softest anywhere. Then you go through the canal in the Neck, then past Lannisport to Oldtown and sell the velvet there, since the Reachmen love nice clothes. Then they buy glass from there and bring it here."

"Wouldn't it be better to buy the glass at Myr?" his sister asked. "They're famous for their lenses."

"They are, and it would be," Laena said...before innocently continuing. "They're just not very fond of us Volantenes, seeing how we've been killing each other since the Doom."

"Always pleasant times in Essos," Tygett japed, the Northerm alongside him laughing in his cup.

"...well if you're so comfortable and happy here, why don't you explain to your good king why you were banished from one of the Free Cities?" Laena asked Tygett, her smile looking more at home on a snake. "Go on!"

"It's not nearly as bad as it sounds," Tygett answered with Lannister cunning and Lannister deftness. "It was just a misunderstanding, honest."

"I know what your misunderstandings are like, Tyg," Brandon laughed, cup in one hand and bread in the other. "How many men died?"

"A hundred!" Tygaeris laughed, the young boy chewing on a cracker as he did.

"None!" the Lannister objected.

"One," Laena Lohaeris corrected in an instant. "My dearest husband, may he rest in peace. Or not. Say what you will about Westeros, they at least figured out that burying bodies might be better for giving the dead some peace than throwing them into a bonfire."

"He wasn't your husband," Tygett countered. "And I didn't kill him!"

"Barely anyone didn't believe you then, and even less believe you now!" Laena laughed. "Why don't you give Viserys and his wife the full story? What harm is there in it all?"

"Fine," Tygett sighed, taking a long sip of wine...before starting. "It was a couple of years ago -"

"Actually, just shy of five years," Laena corrected...before smiling at the Lannister. "Everytime you're not honest, I'll say something."

"Fine, have it your way," Tygett continued. "Me and Brandon - and a few others, before Laena says
anything - had been hired by some of the Old Blood to come within the Black Walls, serve as guardsmen."

"Hired killers," Laena corrected again.

"A little, but most of the work we did was protecting against hired killers and protecting tables full of important papers that would be very unfortunate to end up in others hands," Tygett nodded. "Laena was...a special case. See, Westerosi and Valyrian law is different - Westerosi law comes from the Andals, which is why you can have a trial by combat anywhere in the realms. That one snuck everywhere, even into the North."

"Because Andals really wanted excuses to kill each other, because, oh, did they enjoy a good fight," Laena murmured before shrugging. "Probably why they got crushed by the Freehold. Wasn't fun fighting each other, so they wanted to fight someone stronger, see how fun it would be. Valyria gave them a proper fight, by which I mean it put thousands of them seven foot underground and made the survivors their kipa."

*Their ride*, Viserys knew. It wasn't proper High Valyrian, but given the context it didn't need to be.

"Anyway," Tygett continued, insistent. "One thing that was the same is that inheritance can be done by conditions, like..." the Lannister paused, snapping his fingers as he thought of an example. "Rohanne Webber! She wasn't allowed to inherit Coldmoat if she wasn't wed within two years of her father's death, and the same thing happened with Laena...except she had to have a baby within three years of her father's death, as she was the only Lohaeris left."

"You can tell how that went," Laena said, eying her son sideways, the young boy utterly unaware as he played with his food.

"To help...encourage...her, Laena had an arranged marriage," Tygett explained, choosing his words carefully whilst his son was in earshot. "Of course, Laena and I were already...together...so it was sort of redundant, but the marriage was arranged, only her father's choice in groom was...well...."

"Have you ever felt like you've met someone who just felt like, say, half a person?" Laena asked Viserys. "My betrothed was that."

"Honestly, I never thought I could find a man so boring," Tygett sighed. "I swear, it was like he had taken a blow to the head and half of him died and the rest just limped on. He had no interests about anything. He didn't like anything. He didn't dislike anything. He was just...there, like one of those fake trees in a half-penny mummer's show."

Brandon burst into laughter.

"He wasn't that bad, he was just the dull sort," Laena reasoned, more serious and more quiet. "Probably didn't know much about how to make friends. You find one of those every once in a while. Mayhaps that was why my father chose him."

"What happened to him?" Viserys asked, his sister-wife looking over curiously towards Laena.

"Tygett killed him," Laena said simply, with no more than a shrug of his shoulders.

"Tygett killed him," Brandon agreed by instinct.
"Tygett killed him," Tygaeris echoed, thoughtless as he played with his food.

Tygett sighed.

"I didn't kill him," he said quietly. "It was an accident. Honest!"

"See, my dear husband, or betrothed to use your Westerosi word for it, went out into the city for drinks with Tyg," Laena explained to the prince. "Only he didn't come back. Not alive, anyway."

"I knew that once the two of them were married, Laena and I wouldn't be able to keep together," Tygett took over, Laena smiling as she listened to his honest words. "To show her future husband that I wasn't a threat to him, I decided to go out into the city with him, celebrate our new friendship with some wine, show that I had no hate for him marrying her. He might've been a dullard when he was sober, but put a cup of wine in his hand...and he'd have out feasted even my brother Gerion. A hand on every girl's hip, two cups of wine in every round, a cake from every plate..."

The Lannister trailed off, Laena meeting his green eyes with her violet own before Tygett cleared his throat and spoke his innocent words.

"The only problem was..." he started, Laena crossing her arms in front of him. "Well, he died."

"Because you killed him," Laena smiled. "Isn't that right, Tygaeris?"

"Yep!" the young boy piped eagerly.

"I didn't kill him," Tygett said again. "He drank so much wine and ate so quickly that he threw up, but he was still upright in the chair, so he couldn't breathe. But everyone else was dancing, so none of us noticed, so he drowned."

"Mayhaps the first time a man drowned on dry land," Brandon smiled, laughing into his wine again, his eagle resting at the windowsill and pecking away at a small mouse it had caught between courses.

"This meant Tygett drew the attentions of the tiger cloaks, who passed him over to the guards at the Black Walls, saying he had killed a member of the Old Blood," Laena started, smiling. "That lead to a trial, because in Volantis, you have to be proven guilty to be punished, just like in Valyria. Let no man be destroyed or punished, except by the lawful judgement of his peers," she quoted with a rare formal voice. "There was just one small problem."

"They weren't sure how it could have happened," Tygett mumbled with a shrug of his shoulders. "Everyone thought I had killed him, but they couldn't put the pieces together how I had done it, or how he had died without anyone knowing. Everyone knew I could have done it, everyone knew I had reason to, they just didn't know how I could have done it, because everyone who was there saw that I hadn't put anything in his drink or anything like that and that they had seen him eating and drinking and playing around in his own right."

"And without that one little how, they couldn't give this good, honest lion any punishment," Laena laughed. "It took six months for them to finally give up and say he was innocent, even if they didn't think he was."

"I was innocent, that's why," Tygett smiled back, seeming ready to laugh at the madness of it all. "Didn't stop them from finding something else I was guilty of."
"What?" Viserys asked, wearing a smile of his own.

"Contempt of court," the lion shrugged again, reaching out to pluck a fat red grape from its bundle. "Apparently asking to read through their own code is laws is a crime."

"That isn't what happened," Laena started with a smirk. "You were ordered to remain in the care of the guards until such time as you had been proven innocent or guilty, but negotiated to stay under house arrest so long as you stayed quiet, did nothing wrong and didn't stay out after dark. That got you sent here, unable to leave the grounds without prior permission and a properly filled out form. That would have been fine, if you didn't ask to read the laws."

"They were available to read," Tygett answered innocently as he popped the fruit into his mouth. "And I had that right. You even said it yourself."


"I can read High Valyrian," Tygett nodded before swallowing. "...well, a little. That was Gerion's thing. Westerosi girls love the sound of it."

"Copies which are stored in the archives beneath the Freehall," Laena said at last. "Which need the permission of two out of three of the Triarchs to be opened, which you asked for...when two out of three of the Triarchs were out of the city. Paenymion was at Astapor to discuss trade, and Laerion was leading an army on exercises and was not to be disturbed, which left behind Maegyr, who was still fuming that his daughter Talisa had ran off to Westeros or wherever she went."

"There was nothing in the laws that said I couldn't," Tygett defended. "How was I supposed to know it would get me thrown out the Black Walls?"

"You did that to yourself," Laena laughed before looking toward Viserys to explain. "You see, for Tygett to visit the archives, he would need to get permission to leave the place he stayed - my manse - and then be escorted by the guards to the Freehall, which because he was under arrest at the time meant would be defined as his house."

"How does that work?" Daenerys asked, confused and quiet.

"It's...complicated, but a lot easier to explain in High Valyrian instead of the Common Tongue," Laena admitted. "But to put it short: when he left my manse, he was placed under the care of the guards again until he reached the archive, but they wouldn't let him in because he didn't have permission from the Triarchs, who weren't around to give him permission or not. That means that they couldn't take him in there, but they couldn't turn him away either, so they would have to bring him back here, but they couldn't because he had signed a form saying he wouldn't be allowed to return to the manse until he had been allowed to examine the texts or been denied..."

"...but the guards couldn't keep him because he had been placed into your care," Viserys finished, understanding. "So he couldn't be held by the guards, he couldn't come here, and he couldn't go to the library? What then?"

"Well, Valyrian law says that a man being held must be held in a place suitable for their confinement," Laena explained once more, raising her hand and counting fingers. "One, he couldn't be held by the guards. Two, he couldn't be held here. Three, he couldn't be held at the library. Four, he can't be held within the city, because he is to be detained, five, he can't be held outside because he
has to be contained somewhere, so..."

"...they threw him out?" Daenerys asked.

"They threw him out," Laena nodded...before looking towards Tygett with knowing eyes as the Lannister laughed. "That means that Tyg here killed my dearest husband, then got away with it by making a mockery of the law."

"...and Tywin thought he was the only one of us Lannisters with wits," Tygett murmured with a quiet, rumbling laugh.

"The last Triarch in the city thus declared he was guilty of mocking the courts, which he was by trying to tie them in knots, and sentenced him to exile, at least until the first matter was solved, which it was by finding him innocent, but even if they hadn't he was already miles away," Laena finished. "And that's why the guards can't stand Tygett and his noble, honest Lannister ways -"

There was the soft ringing of a fist against the door, tapping carefully and regularly, but with no little strength. For a moment, Viserys thought Laena might ignore it or send one of her house servants to deal with the matter or even go to the door herself, greeting whoever did it for herself to see what they might do. Instead...

"Come in!" she shouted. "The latch isn't done!"

...the man simply opened the door himself, the door lacking anything but the simplest, lightest of locks. Viserys could barely imagine the house of a pauper with so little in the name of protections for its door, and yet there it was, no more than a chain to be fastened into place whenever they chose not to let a guest in. He almost couldn't believe what he saw with his own two eyes. Even in Westeros, even in the reign of his father, even before the war, there had not been such a confidence in one's own safety and security as there was here in Volantis, within the Black Walls, where guards patrolled often and met men and women not with clubs and curses, but careful hands and calming words, escorting them back to their homes to be sure they were safe rather than throwing them in some side alley to sober. Even Volantis outside the walls wasn't like that.

The man that stepped through was not one he knew, yet he had the blood of a Valyrian and all the looks that came with it: silver hair that flowed straight, violet eyes, sharp cheeked, an air of somber melancholy that hung in the air like the echo of a realm destroyed. He could have seen himself in a mirror and described himself with those words as easily as he might describe the man before him now, but the difference between the two was in the details and most of all in the clothes: where Viserys was in the blacks and reds of his house, the man before him was in blacks and oranges and whites, striped and rippling from head to heel in the colors of the Tigers that ruled the great city.

"Forgive my intrusion, tigress," the man said, giving her a slight bow as if in fealty. He recognized that voice. This was Rhaegon, who had welcomed him into the city in the first place. "I came to inquire as to whether or not the Targārien had yet to make a request for the Triarchy's graces?"

"...tigress?" Tygett asked quietly, surprised. "I thought you weren't interested in politicking?"

Laena smirked in answer, sipping her wine.

"Times change," she answered the Lannister before looking towards Rhaegon, switching into a more practiced, almost regal tone. "I am afraid they have yet to do so, good Free Citizen Muhaerys. Still, I am well aware that they would not be allowed to remain within the Black Walls past two weeks
without their blessings. Would you do me the kindness of escorting the Targārio, Viserys, to the Freehall?"

"But of course, good lady, assuming he is ready to go?" the guard asked, looking towards Viserys.

"We have already finished, so I imagine he is," Laena answered deftly, her switch from host to politician as swift and perfect as a change in clothes. "Still, would you do me the further kindness of finding out the list of tomorrow's appointments? I wouldn't want to arrive unprepared."

"I imagine it will involve a certain Lysene matter, good tigress, but I will be happy to bring you a proper list," he said again, deferrent. Was tigress a rank, mayhaps? Some statement as to her wealth? He knew the tigers were a faction in the Volantene freehold, a great group of more aggressively minded individuals who would see Volantis draw its sword and take its place atop of Essos once more, but he knew little more about the tigers than that. Regardless, he rose from his seat, tapping his sister gently on the shoulder as she looked to him with the concerned eyes of a girl who had never long been apart from him and never once been comfortable without his protections.

"Thank you," Laena smiled at the guard before looking towards the elder Targaryen, relaxing again to casualness once more. "Don't worry, your sister will be safe here."

Promise me, Viserys, his mother whispered, her words as quiet and cold as they had been when they were first uttered. Promise me. They were a mother's words, filled with a mother's love, the words of a mother giving her last son a mission. Look after her. Keep her safe. Raise her the way that Rhaella might have done so. Look after her. Keep her safe.

"I would rather she came with me," Viserys insisted, extending a gentle hand towards his sister to help her from her seat.

"I think it best I stay here," was Daenerys' reply, his sister uncomfortable one moment and then comfortable in the next, well and then sickly, tired then well, all in turns that would have made any woman nauseous. "I...I don't feel so well..."

"I will keep an eye on her, your grace," Tygett said to the Targaryen king. "She'll be safe."

Viserys narrowed his eyes. He hated the idea of leaving her on her own. That was something that he had never done. He had never gone far from her, never allowed her to stray from his sight. It would be a challenge to leave her behind long enough for him to make it down the road and past the length of a manse or two, yet alone to travel around a city without her nearby. And yet...weren't they right? This was mayhaps the safest city in the world for her, safer even than Dragonstone would have been. The Black Walls were beyond even the Usurper's reach, beyond the tip of any blade he may have hired to hunt for him or his sister, and it was with men sworn to him that she would be left. Surely she would be safe with them, he tried to convince himself. It is safer here than it was at Illyrio's manse, so surely she will be safe here?

"...very well," he accepted, his outstretched hand turning to an affectionate pat on his sister-wife's shoulder, Daenerys looking to him with a tired smile. "You'll be safe here with them, but mayhaps you should get some rest, sweet sister. The journey from Pentos was a long one."

"I think I will," his sister answered, almost yawning. "I've been so tired -"

She didn't even get a chance to answer before he kissed her hair. "A queen needn't give anyone a
reason for the things she does, wife. If you wish to rest, rest."

Daenerys looked back at him with surprise in answer to his words, but nodded happily enough as she started to rise from her seat. Ever since they had wed, he had done his part to make sure she would be a fitting queen, treating her exactly the way that Rhaella had been treated by their father: courteously, gently, giving her the freedom of a woman wed and taking her counsel in all things. That was the way it had been for his own mother and his own father, for a king and a queen were meant to rule together, two sides of the same crown, for just as a lord might have a hard and heavy hand to keep the lands given to him orderly and safe, to honor his vows of fealty, so did his lady wife rule the household and was looked to as the soft figure of care and compassion.

If a king was truly father of the realm, then a queen was to be its mother...and whilst a mother should be loving and gentle and caring, she should also be firm and not afraid to say things as she saw them to be, something new for his sister, yet something she was quickly learning to do.

Let her stay the soft queen, he thought to himself, half a prayer and half a hope. Let me be the hard one. I care not what the maesters think of me, so long as they see Daenerys as she truly is.

With that, he turned towards Rhaegon, nodding and accepting his offer of escort without so much as a word as he stepped over to his side, giving his sister one last wave before following him out the door and out onto the city's streets once more, streets that stood beneath the grey skies of coming night, lit with the warm glow of slowly simmering oil lamps, placed rarely to avoid breaking the beautiful look of the city, yet shining brightly for all to see. They were one of the youngest additions to the city, clear in how they were made not of the seamless stone of the Black Walls, but of dark masonry that was made to look as though it was, just as the Long Bridge was, the seams between bricks filled with mortar and smoothed over and painted black...but for all their youth, they lit the streets well enough that not for even a moment did the Targaryen grow concerned about losing his way, about getting lost in the great city, or about being leapt at from the alleys by a footpad with a knife in hand.

That was the greatest triumph of all, for not even for a moment did the Targaryen feel as though he might be in danger, as if there might be a risk on the streets. The streets were calm and ordered, with what few people they passed, Volantene's all, passing with as little interest in them as Viserys might have gave them in return, three man parties of guardsmen passing every once in a while followed by a fourth with a barrel, ready to refill the lamps. There were no brigands hiding in the shadows here, no cutthroats simply waiting for their opening to strike, no assassins hired by Baratheon gold to put an end to the last of the Targaryens. There was nothing but peace everywhere he looked, a tranquility that remained even as they passed out of the streets that were covered in manses to the streets of the more common people of the the city within the city, where the houses grew smaller and grew to share walls, streets that were as orderly as those of the wealthy.

He wasn't sure how long he had walked for before he reached them, or the old craftsman districts past them, districts that seemed to be slowly rousing after centuries of abandonment, with the largest of carpentry stores being home to half built trebuchets and catapults and scorpions and all the other things that took true, honest skill at sums to create. There were bakeries, clothiers, apothecaries, every trade that could be found under the sun, the working heart of a city within a city, yet even the humblest of them all stood proud in comparison to the stores of King's Landing as he remembered them, neatly built and neatly arrayed, yet near enough half of them looked all but deserted.

"Most of the tradesmen moved their workshops to the outer city," Rhaegon explained, knowing what Viserys would ask before he had the chance to. "It is easier for them to meet with the merchants of the port that way...and there are few doubts about how it gets them more customers. Still, the most
important trades can be found within the Walls still."

"Such as siege engineers?" Viserys asked, offhandedly and regretting it the moment the words left his mouth.

"Exactly so," the Volantene answered, taking no slight from his words. "The Black Walls were not made by hands, but forged with spells by sorcerers who made the rock itself flow like water, much as they did your Dragonstone. There is no weapon in the world that might breach them, nor any timber strong enough to hold up a siege tower high enough to reach their summit. They are utterly impregnable."

"More, the very layout of the battlements themselves render them impossible to storm by even the strongest army. Though you may not see it from the distance, the inner city of Old Volantis is a city shaped like a star. This is because the city itself was first built as a fortress by Valyria herself, and all Valyrian fortresses had that shape...and not simply to honor the Fourteen who had blessed the Valyrians of old in every way they might give them their blessing."

"How come?"

"It is ingeniously simple," Rhaegon smiled. "With the walls and towers arranged in such ways, you turn the spaces between the star's points into killing fields. A man pressing up against a square wall must worry only about being hit by arrows from the front. A man pressing up against the Black Walls must worry about being struck from the front, the left and the right all at once, and those are walls bristling with weapons, both obvious and not. The workshops are inside the walls, so any attacker would not be able to destroy them and prevent the defenders from maintaining their weapons."

"There is a reason, good Targārio, why Volantis has never fallen to an assault before," the Captain of the Black Walls said with a quiet laugh. "This city sat on mayhaps the most important place in the Freehold, for it was the one and only way south to the Freehold from the west. The fortifications here are the strongest they ever built, for Valyria's own walls were dragons."

"But what about from the sea?" Viserys asked as they continued their way through to the end of the craftsman's street, coming towards the end of the dragonroad. "Could an attacker not come from the southern side?"

"The Valyrians had the sense to seal the walls on that side, for they knew the Rhoynar were skilled sailors," Rhaegon reasoned. "There is not a side from which the city is not covered by defenses, and the sea is mayhaps the strongest of them all. The Volantene fleet danced with that of Myr, Lys and Tyrosh and held all three at bay even after they sent two hundred ships to vanish in what you might now call the Smoking Sea. It was only when Braavos, Pentos, the Stormlands and your own forefather, Aegon Targaryen, entered the fray that they were overwhelmed."

Viserys was quiet in response to the mention of that last name. Aegon Targaryen, and not just any Aegon. Aegon the Dragon. Aegon the Kingburner. Aegon the Conqueror. The Volantene's had offered to give him command of their forces, some three hundred years ago, to take his place as a dragonlord of an entirely new Freehold. Volantis had been unstoppable. City after city had fallen before their armies, and even the Westerosi had quaked with the news of their ceaseless victories, so concerned about the happenings that the Storm King himself mustered his forces to come to the aid of the Free Cities as part of a grand alliance to foil Volantene ambition. Had Aegon done so, he would have been welcomed by the Volantene's with all the respect that his position would have afforded him. The Stormlanders would have drowned in the Narrow Sea, their transports intercepted
and lit by dragonflame. Myr and Lys and Tyrosh would have been crushed, Pentos cowed into submission, Norvos and Qohor routed and the Ghiscari subjugated. Even mighty Braavos would have been isolated and embargoed and starved into defeat...

...and Volantis would have won. The city would stand dominant over all of Essos west of the Bone Mountains and house Targaryen would never have gone across the Narrow Sea to land in the Blackwater Bay. The Seven Kingdoms would never have been united, and the Free Cities would have instead been welded into a single realm once more, the envy of all the world.

Aegon did not do such things. Aegon did not even stand neutral. Aegon joined the invasion force against them, atop of Balerion the Black Dread, leaving his sisters behind. The reasoning was there own. The actions were for all to see as dragonfire consumed Volantene mentyns and laid waste to their fleets.

That was the mortal blow, Viserys knew. What hope did the Volantene's have to restore the Freehold, when its very greatest symbol had turned its back on them? When the armies that had once marched in the shadow of dragon wings now found themselves fighting against them? It was not merely a blow on the battlefield, it was a crushing, fatal wound to their morale, to their spirit to make war. It would be as if Hugor of the Hill had come from the dead to lead the Northmen against the Vale of Arryn during one of their many wars.

It was the single greatest cause for their downfall, and it would be the single greatest challenge he would have to face here. How could it not be, when it was directly the fault of house Targaryen that the Volantene's lost the war?

...the Triarchs will want an explanation, he thought to himself, swallowing hard. But if I mention how we Targaryens aided them again and again afterwards, mayhaps that will help?

Desperate to clutch at anything that might take his mind off of the matter, off of the grim odds ahead, Viserys leapt at the change of surroundings that came as they emerged out of the place of craftsmen and into an open plaza where all the main arteries of the city might meet in its beating heart...yet it was an empty place, utterly devoid of stalls, utterly devoid of anything but benches, sculptures of black slate and a three tiered fountain in the midst, made in the shape of a fourteen sided star and spritzing away to awe crowds that were no longer there. What was this area for? A meeting place? A place of entertainment? Part of the city's commons? A mere centerpiece for the gardens all around?

"Is this a market?" Viserys asked, as interested in finding out as he was in changing the topic. "I thought most merchants made their stalls on the Long Bridge?"

"They do, for Volantis is a city within a city," his escort explained to him, caring not for the words heh had spoke before. "There is New Volantis, the city past the Black Walls, but in here you have the city within, Old Volantis, true Volantis, standing just as the Valyrians had built it. This is where the original fourteen roads of the city meet, just as they did in Old Valyria centuries before."

"Few merchants come here now, as most prefer to sell their wares on the Long Bridge," Rhaegon continued. "But some still will. We Volantene's are proud of our heritage, so merchants with Valyrian things often come here to sell them, knowing that the Old Blood and even the Triarchs themselves will spend fortunes to own a piece of their past."

A thought occurred to him, then, nudding at him from the recesses of his mind. Were the Targaryens themselves not a piece of Valyria's history? Of all the families left alive in the world, only they could truly claim to not only be Freeholders, but Lords Freeholder, the greatest holders of Valyria's wealth
and might and the masters and mistresses of dragons. Could things belonging to his line have made its way to this market square at some point? Might he walk into a Triarch's home and see Blackfyre sat upon a mantle, pried from the hands of a man of the Golden Company and sold as a piece of Valyrian history? Mayhaps he might even find himself staring down Balerion the Black Dread's empty eye sockets, the Usurper selling the skull and the rest of the great dragon's remains to whoever might have the interest in buying it?

It was a bitter thought to think that the property of a proud house, his house, might be treated in such a manner. The Captain of the Black Walls saw it in his eyes, and spoke once more.

"There have been some Targaryen things to come through here," the Volantene admitted. "But not what you might think."

"Then what?" Viserys asked, pointed. "Banners from the rebellion, soaked with the blood of Crownlander men? Ashes from Summerhall? My brother's silver harp?"

"Rocks."

The prince looked back at him with surprise.

"...rocks?"

"Closer to pieces of brick in truth," Rhaegon explained, soothing the Targaryen's temper with every word. "Harrenhal was the last true demonstration of a dragon's fury. It is as much a testament to the power of your forefathers as their are to Valyria itself, so pieces of its burnt walls often find themselves here. There are many fakes - one merchant tried to pass off a piece of Storm's End as a piece of Harrenhal - but if one has the eye to recognize the marks of dragonfire, they can find true pieces."

And then Rhaegon smiled.

"I myself have a piece in my own home, about the size of a fist," he admitted. "Hewn from the Kingspyre Tower during the Tourney of Harrenhal, where your brother Rhaegar crushed the opposition well enough that no one noticed men taking hammer and chisel to the brickwork behind them. You must realize, this is the closest many Volantenes will ever come to seeing the dragons of the Freehold with their own eyes. A dozen of them may have dragon eggs of their own, bought over the centuries, yet none hatch."

"There are dragon eggs here? Truly?" Viserys asked before smiling. "I suppose if there was ever a place for them to be found outside of Westeros, it would be here, wouldn't it?"

"All things Valyriha are to be found here, and few things are more treasured than those to do with dragons," Rhaegon continued. "Triarch Laerion has a full set of armor from Tyrosh, wrought for a dragon that simply never came. Some amongst the Freeholders even buy wyverns from traders that dare to make the visit of Sothoryos, so that they might feel for themselves what it might be like to hold a dragon's hatchling on their arm. Such things are frowned upon now, though. The beasts have begun to grow wild in the city, hunting mice and rats and dogs."

...yet as they walked through the empty square of what was mayhaps once the greatest market in the world, its spaces for stalls given over to gardens, he noticed that there was one space that was not empty, a single tent in the lonely street. It was a large one, a great pavilion of a red as dark as blood, teardrop banners gently wavering in the windless evening, marked with nothing but the crimson
cloth from which they were cut.

"That tent is Maera's tent," Rhaegon explained, a hint of uncertainty creeping into the voice Captain of the Black Walls. "She has no interest in offering her services outside the Black Walls, lest she find herself attacked for them. More, the Triarchs have no interest in letting her do so, either."

"And who is this Maera?" the Targaryen prince asked, intrigued.

"She is the last of a very powerful, very ancient lineage," came the answer, quiet and contemplative. "She is the last of the blood sorcerers, whose powers were so great in their time that they could be found in the retinue of every one of the Lords Freerholder. Even your forefathers would have surely had one of their number in their ranks, mayhaps a dozen or more. You would be wise to see her talents for yourself."

"A blood sorcerer?" Viserys asked, uncertain. "Why would I ever wish to go near her?"

"Because she can see things," he answered, even more quietly. "Many things. Things that should be impossible to see...and because despite the title she is not nearly the woman you might think her to be, though that makes her all the more unsettling for it. All of the Triarchs speak with her before engaging on any uncertain path because of it."

Viserys swallowed, looking towards the pavilion. It was innocent looking enough...but so was a block when it was not being used to part the separate the heads of guilty men from their shoulders, and at least that was no threat to a man's immortal soul as so dark a magic might be. Few men with their sanity intact should want to go within, and yet...what Rhaegon said was true. His forefathers had made use of blood sorcerers, and they had served a vital part in the Freehold. Not simply in the more obvious ways that their powers might be applied, but as communicators, diplomats and advisers. Their profession had been a feared but respectable one in those days, but more, could Viserys allow this chance to meet with one to pass him by? When he had need of every advantage? When this one moment might yet be the difference between victory and defeat?

He swallowed. Had there ever truly been a choice to make?

"Will you wait for me?" he asked, turning towards the tent.

"So long as you don't take too long," Rhaegon answered, finding a nearby bench to sit upon. "...though do not mind if I don't follow you in."

"I shan't be too long," Viserys said honestly.

*I wouldn't want to be in there for long*, he thought as he started to make his way towards it, walking down the street towards its veiled maw, where a thick red curtain hung low, blocking all light from within. *But...for Westeros...for Dany...*

He took a deep breath.

Then he stepped forward. One step. Two steps. Three steps. The tent grew closer and closer, the calling of the hairs on his neck ever louder. What monsters might lie within? What horrifying secrets might lurk in its mistress's memories? What nightmares could be unleashed upon him.

*For Daenerys,* came a thoughtless echo. *Do it for her.*
His hand found the cloth's edge, parting it, and the prince stepped through into the warmth and brightness beyond...

...and the tent within was a place far unlike anything he had expected. Where he thought there might be corpses piled left and right, there were simple crates or boxes, concealed beneath thick white blankets to keep whatever was within safe from rain and the cold. Where he thought there might be a fountain of steaming crimson to fill the room with the stench of iron, there was a simple table, unintrusive in shape and decor, neatly arranged with candles and cups and a bottle of wine. Where he thought there might be tomes written in strange scripts that hurt the eye to see and twisted creations that lurched around crying tears for an existence that should never have been, the only sign that this was a tent belonging to a blood sorceress at all was mayhaps the simple black spire upon the table's surface, a black so dark that it ate the light around around it, shining little and consuming all.

That was a dragonglass candle, he knew.

Of its powers he knew less - it was said by his father that Visenya Targaryen, the first of the Conqueror's two brides, had used one to peer into the lands of Westeros and determine the strengths of each of the kingdoms....but even the maesters knew of how the dragonlords of old had made use of them, though what was true and what was naught but rumor no one truly knew; could they truly peer into the minds of men, woken or dreaming, .

Its mistress was not far, for where he thought he would find an old crone, her back hunched over and misshapen and her hair thin and twisted, there was a beautiful young woman, draped all in white from head to heel, the very same white as the silver hair of her Valyrian blood, humming with a voice like birdsong as she cradled a sleeping cat, the little black creature resting comfortably against her body as her right hand's fingers slowly moved across the parchment of a book, feeling the imprint of every letter from the mark where the quill was pressed down against its surface years before. Her face was heart shaped and soft cheeked and lipped, conjuring old memories of that woman who had been at the court of his father for years as his good-sisters handmaiden: Ashara Dayne. Yet there was something different about the woman that was sat before him now on the far side of that table, something he could feel simply by gazing upon her.

It was as if she radiated an aura of soothing gentleness, as calming and relaxing as the crackle of a warm fireplace in the dead of winter or a mother's embrace. It was a comforting thing, something that grew only all the more so by the sweet sound of her humming, yet it was even more unnerving for it. Here was a blood sorceress, a practitioner of the very same art that the Gogossosi had used to mate man and beast together to produce inhuman abominations for their fighting pits pits, a woman of the art rumored to be able to rip the thoughts from a living man's mind...and here she looked as innocent as his own sister, utterly harmless and filled with naught but love for the world.

Never in his life had he felt so uneased.

"There is nothing to be scared of, your grace," she said, looking towards him with a smile and white eyes. "I mean you no harm."

"...you can't see?" he asked, stepping into the tent proper. "How can you tell who I am without seeing?"

"One doesn't always need eyes to see, good Targário," she answered instantly, gently taking the cat in her hands and placing it on the ground, the tom purring happily and affectionately as she stroked the back of his neck. "Please be careful around carts this time, will you? I don't want to have to mend you again."
She took her hand away, the little black tom looking towards her with grateful attentions before slipping out the side of tent, not caring to bother with the flap that Viserys had come through and simply pushing through the skirt and out into the evening city. Closing the cover of her book and moving it to the side, atop one of the crates, the blood sorceress looked towards him with a laughed.

"Lovely cat, but what he has in sweetness, he must be lacking in wits," she smiled. "He always keeps getting himself hurt in the silliest ways."

"A crushed tail?" Viserys asked, curious.

"If only it was so easy. He was near enough crushed in half by an ironmonger's cart whilst running after a mouse."

The prince looked back at her, surprised. "But he just..."

"Indeed he did," Maera answered. "I am sure you are more aware than many that fire and blood can mend many, many things that others would call impossible. Seven kingdoms, for example."

He almost couldn't believe what he was hearing or seeing. Was this a glamor? Was this truly a blood sorceress? Had Rhaegon taken him for a fool and sent him to a mummer's witch? What in the name of the Seven was going on?

"I take it you didn't step into my tent simply to make conversation, though," Maera asked, leaning back into her seat. "Very, very few people come in here without a reason...and I am sure you have one as well."

Viserys straightened himself. As surprising as this might be, as strange as it might be to have the witch he thought to be a crooked old crone to be but a normal woman, he stepped forward. This was not something he could afford to be afraid of, not when he had a realm to reclaim. Fear was a boy's thing, a prince's thing. Viserys was a man grown and a king both. "I do."

"Then please," the sorceress said, offering him a seat on the other side of the table and leaning forward, head on hands as ringed fingers rested on her wrists. "Tell me what you would like me to do for you this fine evening."

Viserys swallowed, yet he sat before her, looking back towards her milky eyes and feeling all the more unnerved by the experience. He forced those feelings outside. Daenerys. All he did he did for her. What difference did it make if what he did for her was to escort her from one city to the next or visit a blood sorceress?

"What is it that you might do?" he asked with quiet, almost restrained words.

"I am sure you know what I am, good prince," she almost giggled, like a girl playing at being a lady. "I am master of the body, and not in the way the Braavosi or Lysene courtesans might claim to be. Say but the word, and I can make the bones of your cheeks and face shift and move and make it so that even your own mother would not be able to recognize you. You would not be the first Westerosi I gave this service."

"Mayhaps you would not wish to look like a Targaryen at all, and simply wish to start over, away from threats and danger?" she asked, reaching out to his cheek with a soft hand and softer fingers, feeling the lines and curves of his face before he shied away. "I could easily make you look more
Rhoynish. You are part Martell, after all, and it is easier to work with one's body when their blood already carries the look, even if it does slumber. Otherwise, I could easily move your chin and nose and brow to give you a more Andal look once I darken your eyes to blue."

"Or..." she continued, pondering, her fingers sliding down to his chest, examining the muscles there before moving over to his shoulders. "I could make these swell. I could make you broad chested and strong, with such strength that no Targaryen has had for centuries. Is that something that might interest you, good prince? To have the raw strength in your hands to crush the Usurper's eyes and head between your hands, to be a mountain of muscle and sinew?"

"I don't want any of that," Viserys said. "I want to know anything that might help me return to Westeros."

"I could do that without using my glass candle," Maera laughed. "I assume you are going to be speaking with the Triarchs tomorrow?"

"That is my hope."

"Then let me give you a little advice," the blood sorceress continued. "Don't call it Westeros, the Andal name. Call it Vesteros, the High Valyrian name. The former will make you seem like you have forgotten your roots and heritage. The latter makes you seem Valyrian."

Useful advice, Viserys knew and accepted.

"Another little remark is not to concern yourself much with magical things, as I am assuming you came in here for," she said with a playing look on her face. "Sorcery can do many things, more than you might think. It is a key that can open many doors, yet like most keys, you would find it rather unsuited for, say, shoeing a horse. Valyria did not conquer with sorcery alone. You will need armies to take Vesteros."

"I hope to get them from your own Triarchs," he nodded. "Is there anything you could do that might help?"

"Many things," Maera answered...before adding, "Few of which I would be allowed to do, seeing as they are Triarchs and help pay for my dinners."

Then she paused as an idea came to mind. "But, I suppose...no, I am not sure you would want to."

"What?" he asked, hands on the table. "Whatever it is, I wish to know."

"The only way I can show you is with this," she said, gesturing towards the glass candle with a tip of her hand. "Would you like to see?"

"I will," he insisted. "If it can help me return home again, then I would do it a thousand times."

"Even though it is blood magic?" she teased.

"I would pay any price."

"Are you sure?" she asked, the tiniest hint of playfulness slipping into her voice. "Truly sure?"

"But of course," Viserys replied, smiling even though she couldn't see it. "Besides, I have never had
the chance to see a glass candle truly work."

"They don't work nearly as well as they once did," Maera admitted, rising from her seat to reach towards one of the blanketed boxes that helped support either side of the room and played the part of shelves, her hand sleeping through the cloth to grab something within, something that squeaked with surprise at the touch of her fingers. "But they do work still...even if they are a lot more stubborn than the ones of our great-great-great-grandfathers, to be sure!"

Her hand emerged...and in her gentle grip was a little grey mouse, looking around at the world with curious eyes and wiggling in her hand, yet not in the slightest bit afraid, no, it was comfortable, sure it was safe in her hands. Maera smiled at the feeling of its little movements, reaching with her other hand to brush through its fur before reaching down to the table and through the various bowls and plates to find a hefty morsel of cake for it to eat, the little mouse cheeping with delight as it took a bite, chewing away eagerly, its mistress mimicking the sound before laughing.

"He's adorable," Viserys laughed for himself.

"He is, isn't he?" Maera asked, smiling as her hand reached for a nearby dagger on the table's top, a mercygiver, a needle thin stiletto that could slip through the gaps in a knight's armor to pierce the heart within. "I bet his fur is white like snow."

Maera took the blade and before the Targaryen could react, before the realization could even dawn on him, her hand moved so fast as to be almost a blur and so precise that the mouse didn't even realize what was about to happen before it struck, alive one moment and dead the next, so quick it still had a mouthful of cake held in its fat cheeks.

Then Maera, never once losing her cheer, never once hesitating for a moment, opened it utterly on the blade's tip, squeezing the body over the black candle's crystalline tip, squeezing the blood from it, squeezing the essence from it, all pouring down in a rain of crimson, whispering words in a tongue he could not know...

...and by the gods, Old and New, the candle burned. It was crimson. It was violet. It was white. It was black. Gold. Red. Blue. Every color at once. No color at all. Colors without color. Colors which the eyes burnt to see. Colors for which there were no name. Colors that threatened to drive him mad.

He closed his eyes, recoiling as the after image burnt into his eyelids. They were places. Forests. Skies. Fires. Cities. Each and every one, mingling with the others, like ink swirling in water, melding into a tendriled maelstrom of madness, clutching and clawing for his attentions.

Through it all the blood sorceress spoke a tongue he had never heard before, or at the very least could not understand, singing the words, singing a choir of a thousand voices, a million, the prince clutching at his head, his temples pounding, pounding, a battleground of lands beyond lands, worlds beyond worlds, all times, all places, all things, all that is and was and could be and could have been and might yet be and - warmth, soft, soothing warmth.

"You can open your eyes now," Maera said, her voice bringing order to chaos and bringing with it the sounds of city, of wind, of distant water and a summer's breeze. "Your eyes will hurt for a while, but it'll fade."

Viserys blinked, feeling the ungodly ache melting from his sight as rays of piercing sunshine flooded his eyes, the prince wincing as his vision adjusted. Had it not been night, but a heartbeat ago, he couldn't help but think as he shielded his senses? What had she done? What in the name of the gods,
Old and New and Valyrian and all the other gods in the world had he just seen?

"You're nearly there."

He blinked again, trying to focus his eyes. The pain was going, just as she said it would, but it was a pain the likes of which he had never felt before in his life. He had felt the pain of cuts and burns and scrapes and bruises and choking. Those were pains of the body. He had felt the loss of a brother and a father and a mother, all gone a matter of months apart. That was a pain of the heart. This was something else, something new, something men might go their whole lives without ever once encountering. This was the pain of a mind that couldn't begin to grasp the things that he had seen, glimpsed in the place between places, the pain of a mind trying its best to know something that was by its very nature unknowable. Yet he pushed his way through it, as he had all the other pains, letting it fall away from him till at last he opened his eyes and could see once more and gazed out to see the shining warmth of the sun before noon, bathing the land beneath in its comforting light where before there had been naught by the gently rippling cloth of the blood sorceress's tent.

Before him, as far from him as the cages and crates had been, was a railing, a half-wall of black stone that was not marked by the hammered marks of chisels or the lines of mortar, but formed in a single piece, as Dragonstone was, and the prince stepped forth with trembling legs to see the sorceress gazing out upon what lay beyond, waving him over with a look of utter contentment upon her as he came to see...to see...

"...Seven hells," he muttered in his awe.

...a city. It was a city that he had never seen before in life, never, not in Westeros or in Essos or in his wildest dreams, for it was a city like none other. To his left and to his right and infront of him it sprawled, covered in buildings that stood as cousins to those in Volantis, to Dragonstone, yet grander, grander, like a father compared to a son or a mother to a daughter. It was a city that he gazed down upon from his place upon a mountainside, a place where he stood amongst beautiful swirling statues of dragonkin, gods and heroes alike, the slope sculpted into hundreds of terraces, home to manses and palaces and temples and countless other places that shared common blood with those below him, with those that were far beneath: great walls of perfectly fused black stone, tall and proud and well built with perfect straight lines on perfect straight streets of that very same material, carefully planned and carefully built so as to pass the manmade rivers of water that flowed through the city's midst, fed not by the waters that flowed down from aqueducts that led into the city's breast from the mountain tops and from distant lands, but from the waters of the bay that dominated the western side, where grand ships with sails as white as silver came to and fro. All this lay within a bowl of mountains, fourteen of them stood all around in a circle and stood guard around what was surely the greatest city in the world, a place that could boast proudly as being the home to millions upon millions.

Yet for all the souls that surely dwelled within, the city looked to have none of the rot that had infected King's Landing in its youth, no shanties outside its walls, no Fleabottom filled with brutes and the destitute and the sick. Order reigned supreme here, and where he might look to see such weaknesses of the city he instead found great buildings, four floors in height and yet of the same black stone as the rest of the city, the very same concept as the apartments of Maegor's Holdfast, yet vaster in scale. Even there did he see gardens dotted with statues, canals dotted with boats bringing goods from the port to the market that sat there, every inch of it covered in stalls and people whose silver hair he could see even from his vantage point, so far away. The pattern became obvious, then: fourteen mountains, fourteen great roads that led to them, meeting in the center where an enormous monument stood, proud for all to see, of a dragon of fourteen bodies and fourteen sets of wings and fourteen heads, one gazing down each and every road, fourteen banners fluttering at their feet, each
and every one of them identical. The city was a web, that much was obvious, but it was not identical. Some parts bore the chimneys that were the mark of craftsmen of countless professions, thousands of them working within the city's breast and thousands more near the docks, building ships of every kind, from pleasure barges to merchantmen to war galleys. Some parts were places of commerce, where every good imaginable, every item to be found under the sun, could be found in a single place, filled by throngs of men and women and children alike. Some parts were more lavish, almost royal, yet they flew no banners from their walls or from the golden domes that were their roofs or from the towers that rose besides them, every floor marked by a ring of gold around their midst, growing from their corners.

It was the noise that broke him from his daze, for he had only looked downwards, towards the earth. The noise brought his attentions upwards, towards the sky. It was a howl. It was a roar. It was a cry of fright.

It was the noise of a dragon.

It was the noise of dragons.

It was the noise of a hundred of them, some with riders and some not, dancing through the clear skies. They were playing with one another, teasing and chasing and having mock battles, some even seeming to laugh or chirp as they did, comfortable and happy.

That was enough. He had never seen this city with his own eyes, yet he knew what this place was from that one thing alone. There was not a single one of its sons or daughters from Westeros or the Free Cities or anywhere across the world that would not be able to name it from that description alone.

"Maera," he asked, looking to her to see the winds fluttering through her silver hair. "Is this -"

"It is," she answered, smiling innocently and looking to him as if she could truly see him for the first time before reaching out over the railing with a hand outstretched, as if to try and touch the world below.

"This is Valyria."

Viserys stood with mouth half-agape. How could that be? How could he be able to stand there and see it with his own eyes, to feel the winds blowing through his hair, to hear the sounds of bustling life below and the games of dragons above? Had the Doom not vanquished Valyria utterly, destroying the city that had been, for millennia, the heart of the world? How could this truly be the city? How? How? Were her magics so powerful that she could take him there, to a world four hundred years gone? Or was it simply an illusion, a mummer's show wrought by glass candle alone?

He had to ask.

"How?" the prince spoke with a voice little higher than a whisper, the blood sorceress resting against the railings with arms crossed, peering down at the capital of the Freehold. "I though Valyria was destroyed? And had rivers of fire?"

"A dragonglass candle lets you see many things," was her answer. "Even things that don't exist anymore. This is Valyria as it was some six hundred years ago, long before the Doom, and as for the rivers of fire..."
"You must've only seen Valyria as her enemies and the jealous would imagine her to be," she said, warm. "This is what Valyria truly looked like. It wasn't a place of pure fire, like the Westerosi maesters like to think and how the septons preach. They made it into that because it fits their view of how the world should be, with what they think of as evil people coming from evil lands. It fits the songs better, doesn't it, if the cruel dragonlords with their mastery of flame comes from a land burnt and ravaged, even though the maesters themselves acknowledge that they were shepherds first?"

Viserys couldn't help but laugh in answer, and the sorceress smiled all the more for it.

"No, this is the Land of the Long Summer," she said, waving towards the city sprawling beneath. "Winter never dared to tread here. Not once in the five thousand years the Freehold stood did winter come to this land. It was the land where the flowers never stopped blooming and the crops never stopped growing."

"For five thousand years did Valyria stand atop the world, filling the world with light and civilization," Maera said dreamfully, looking down the hills as if she could see the city with her own two eyes. "It was a light Valyrians took with them wherever they went. They built roads, fortresses, cities. They policed the lands they took, kept them clear of brigands and raiders both, so that any merchant, any man or woman or child, could travel for thousands of miles without escorts and without fear."

"Everywhere, they brought law," she continued, pointing towards another building on the opposite side of the city, on the opposite of the Fourteen Flames, a great domed place of fourteen towers, built onto the mountainside on steps so grand it was as if they had reshaped the mountain itself, every level home to different buildings and different organs of the Freehold, dedicated to the different parts of its governance, every tower playing a different part. "That's the Hall of the Freeholders, where the Freehold was ruled and where the Triarchs would settle important matters...not in battles as magisters or Westerosi or anyone else might, or through assassinations, but by debate. Three of the towers are for them, but others are for lawyers, treasurers, governors, generals..."

"You can see here?" Viserys asked.

"Yes," she said, honest and smiling. "In the light of a glass candle even the blind can see. But I have seen this land so often to know the place of every building with nothing more than the warmth of the sun on my face. I couldn't help but come back here, every time I could."

She quietened, then.

"It...it was what took my sight," she admitted, quietly. "To gaze into a glass candle is to see things that should never be seen. The thread of which the world was woven was not meant for mortal eyes. But I don't regret trading it for the chance to gaze upon these golden spires. Not in the slightest. Oh, Valyria..."

He saw the glittering mark of a tear upon her cheek.

"Valyria was special," she said with a cracking voice. "When Valyria fell...the whole world fell with her. The Dothraki came out of the east, the Free Cities fought one another, the dragonroads became unsafe, pirates filled the seas, libraries burnt...so many of her achievements were lost. It was like Valyria and her sisters of Oros and Tyria had never truly existed."
"The Doom was a tragedy," he echoed, looking down. The city was not just ordered, it was beautiful. Clean streets, clean houses, clean peoples. Grand architecture everywhere he looked, great and small. Golden domes and steps. There was not a man in the world who would not be able to look upon it and not see Valyria's splendour.

"It was," she said, before letting out a sad sigh and forcing a smile on her face again. "But so long as Volantis stands and stands true to their ideals, then the Freehold still lives in our laws, our elections, our belief that no one is born with the right to rule, even the tongue we talk keeps the dream of Valyria alive. The Doom destroyed the greatest city that the world has ever seen, but even it couldn't kill an idea. You can't kill ideas. You can't stab them with swords, or shoot them with arrows, or burn them with dragonfire."

And with that, she stood straight again, a hint of pride on her face. "So as long as even one of us still lives to remember what Valyria was, what it truly was and what it truly stood for, then Valyria will never truly die," she said, looking down at the city before facing him again with white hair and white eyes...

...before reaching out, and tapping him on the chest, over his heart. "...but will live on, in here, forever. That's why Volantis is going to -"

There was the howl of a dragon before she might have a chance to finish and Viserys looked to the source to see -

"You won't ever catch me!" shouted a woman, laughing as she blurred past, her violet dragonmount swooping around to curve past the towers, banking as her silver braid glittered in the light. "I'll be past Vhagar's Flame before you're anywhere close!"

"We'll see about that!" came a man's shout in answer, as amused as the woman had been. "After her, Laelthrax, and quickly! That woman has stolen my heart!"

He looked to his left, seeing a blur of white descending as fast as its wings might carry it. This was his chance. This was the chance to do something that Targaryens had been trying to do for centuries. This was his chance to do what his great-grandfather had died for at Summerhall. He had to have it. He had to do it. He had to. He would never be able to forgive himself if he didn't take the chance now, and so he reached out - and for the briefest of moments, for but a heartbeat, he felt it on his fingertips. Hot and as strong as steel, yet as supple as any leather, burning his fingers in its passing. Dragonscale.

He barely had the chance to register the sensation on his fingertip before it was replaced by pain, before the dragon had gone onwards with its master...but even that small moment to feel it in its passing was worth the pain and more, so much more. Dragons were the very reason for the existence of the Seven Kingdoms that he laid claim to with every breath he drew and every beat of the heart that lay beneath his breast, its every thump a cry of defiance to Robert Baratheon and the rest of the usurpers that had stolen the Targaryen birthright. It was a right that was theirs because of their dragons, because of how Balerion the Black Dread had forged the Iron Throne on the battlefield and in the Red Keep both, its ebon flames welding together kingdoms that had never before been united beneath one banner just as easily as it did their blades. Dragons were what had made the Targaryens powerful, both in Westeros and at Dragonstone and millenia before, in Valyria, where they stood alongside the other Forty Families with dragonmounts of their own. It was by dragon's wings that the Targaryens had rose, it was by dragon's flame that they had done what had never before been done, it was with dragon's roar that they had brought peace to a land that had never truly known it
and it was by the loss of those dragons that they had fallen, a long and dark path that had led to his flight.

Dragons were the symbol of his line, their very reason to be, but too many of them had died in the madness that was the Dance, from which their numbers never recovered. Smaller and smaller did they come, till there was but one last, a tiny and scrawny thing, sickly and weak and with wings that had never formed properly, ribs of bone with no flesh between to catch the air and to let it soar as its kin might. It was a far cry from the beasts of the past, from dragons such as Vhagar and Meraxes and Balerion and the older and greater yet mounts of the Freehold, who were rightly revered as a gift from the Fourteen-Beneath, returned always to the Flames so that they might return to the gods that had made them and take their place at their side once more, yet it was a dragon all the same.

And it was the last of them. Not just in the Crownlands, not just in Westeros, not just in Essos, it was the last of the dragons anywhere, for from the Sunset Sea to the distant lands of Asshai, no longer could the sound of their roars be heard or the sight of their great wings be spotted.

And yet here, in Valyria, they still flew as though the Doom had never occured. Mayhaps even one of the dragons in the skies above had a Targaryen upon its back, leading their mount in its exercise and its play alike. Mayhaps one of those dragonriders above was named Viserys...and oh, how he envied them. What Targaryen wouldn't? What man wouldn't? What person in the entirety of the world would not envy them and all that they could do? He would be able to soar over the lands all around him, over the world, with his sister and his wife at his side. He would be able to return to Westeros a hero, welcomed by the stunned masses with thundering cheers and waving banners. He would be able to defeat the Baratheon and reclaim the throne and raise the Targaryen banner over the Red Keep, as it should always be. With it, he could set aside his fears of betrayal and murder and assassination by the men and women he visited to gain support for his return to Westeros.

With it, he could be a husband. With it, he could be a father. With it, he could be a **king**.

It was the toll of a bell that shook him from his dreaming gaze. It came from the Hall of the Freeholders, where great crowds were leaving the building at the end of the debate, melting with every step as the whole world he saw began to degenerate into the same, swirling mass that it had came from, falling apart at the edges as the sounds melded and the breeze flickered.

"Maera?" he asked. "Is this supposed to happen?"

"It is, alas," she answered with the saddest of sighs. "It means our time here is over. One person can stay longer than two, and bigger sacrifices let you stay longer...but you can't stay here forever. No matter how much I might try."

She stepped close, slinking across the black stones with steps so slight it was as if she floated over, yet Viserys could not help but look out to the city for one last time, watching Valyria and all its splendour dissolve into nothingness once more. This time, he felt the same pain she felt. Why did it have to go? Why did Valyria have to fall? Why couldn't he stay here for a little longer? Why couldn't he stay and see the dragons and the Freeholders and his kin? Why did he have to go?

He sighed. Better to have seen it once than to have never seen it at all, he couldn't help but think...only to look down with surprise as Maera slid her arms around him and embraced him, white eyes closed.

"Close your eyes," she said. "It'll make it easier."
Viserys did as she commanded, closing his eyes as the world melted, colors and places and peoples dissolving into a slurry of things that man was never meant to see, things that were kin to the beams and wires and strings of a mummer’s show. He might have gone mad if he witnessed it, if he didn't understand why Maera held him. She was an anchor, the sole place of calm in the eye of the storm, the place where chaos became order and where even the greatest madness became sane. Her embrace kept his mind from daring to contemplate the depths around him, his closed eyes helping to keep it from having anything else to feed upon but the noise, the screeching cacophony of a world's unmaking, and then - silence. Awful silence, true and unquestionably absolute, where his thoughts rang like thunder, his hands squeezing the silver haired sorceress all the tighter.

Then the silence broke to the sound of fluttering cloth, and he dared to open his eyes to see...

...Volantis. The red cloth fluttered on all sides, the candles flickered, the cages chirped and growled and chittered, yet all that was right in an instant, as if nothing had ever happened. His arms held no one, for on the other side of the table, exactly where she had been before, was Maera, sat behind a glass candle that was quiet and still, a thin smoke of a black so dark as to ache the eye and darken everything else around it rising for a heartbeat before vanishing.

"There!" she smiled, leaning back into her seat and stretching her arms. "Safe and sound once again."

"That...that was incredible," he said, the amazement coming through his voice truly for the first time. "I had never even imagined that it was possible to do such things!"

"Few people can," she answered, wearing that same smile as she wore before, resting her head on her hands. "But once they see with their own two eyes what a glass candle might do, there are few who doubt it. Lands across the world can be viewed in a heartbeast, as can a man's deepest, most well guarded thoughts and secrets. That is just the beginning of their power..."

"...and, unfortunately, what I am limited to in their use," she sighed. "Magic all but fled the world after the Doom. In ancient days, the sorcerers of Valyria could view lands the way we did for hours on end. Now we have not even a tenth the time they did, and it takes blood to get even that much."

She raised her hand, as if knowing the question he was about to ask.

"Valyria and her daughters had the greatest magics in the world in their day, but I do not know what has happened to seal it away," she gave as an honest answer. "Whatever it was that took magic from the world greatly weakened all things born of sorcery, even the glass candles of Old Valyria. In the past, a blood sorcerer need only wave his hand and they would burst into flame. There was no need to do anything more than that."

"But could you view King's Landing?" Viserys asked, an idea coming to mind. "Could I send word to allies in Westeros?"

"Mayhaps the latter, but not the former," Maera answered, seeing the reaction to her cryptic answer in Viserys' surprised frown. "I have viewed many places. Yi Ti. Asshai. Even southern Gogossos, to see if anything of our cousins remained there, only to see ruins and jungle and the creatures of their fleshcraft grown feral and mad."

"But I cannot view King's Landing. There is something there," she tried to explain, struggling to find the words for it. "It is not the first place I have had trouble eying. There is another in the heart of the North. The true heart. The frozen heart. The heart nestled within the heart, sleeping like a dragon
within its egg, singing its song into the earth."

"King's Landing is the same, but different somehow," Maera murmured, as much to herself as it was to him. "There is something there as well, but..."

She laughed, realizing.

"Oh, good prince, you wouldn't be able to understand what it was even if I tried to tell you," she said with innocent amusement. "I don't think it'll be a problem you will have to face, so there's no need to worry yourself about it. After all, it wasn't bothering you before you came in and it won't bother you after you leave, so why make a fuss about it? No, that's nothing you need trouble yourself with."

"I...suppose you are right," was the prince's reply, rising from the seat once more. "Thank you, for showing..."

"...home?"

"...home," he smiled sweetly at the thought. "It means a lot."

"The Triarchs will like it, if you tell them that you have seen the city for yourself," she nodded, explaining. "It is what separates Volantis from Myr, Lys and Tyrosh. We still remember where we came from and keep to the Freehold's ideals. They no longer do."

"Thank you again," the prince thanked with grateful words, turning towards the flap and rpressing it open to exit -

"Oh, and..." the blood sorceress spoke with hesitation, uncertain of whether to continue.

The very thought made Viserys freeze. Could possibly cause a blood sorceress of such power to make crippled animals walk again to hesitate? What could make any woman versed in the ancient arts of the Valyrian Freehold, able to view the past and the present and all the futures that might yet come to be hesitate? What could unsettle a woman who had glimpsed upon Valyria, queen of all cities, and be so dark as to -

"...I don't suppose you have an orange?" she asked with an almost shy hesitation, flared with a hint of hope.

"What?"

"I like oranges," Maera smiled sweetly and innocently again, just as she had when he first came into the tend. She looked nothing like the blood sorceress she was, nothing like a mistress of one of the darkest forms of magic to be found in the world. She looked like but a woman. "Do you have any?"

"I'm sorry," Viserys apologized. "I haven't."

"Oh," she piped in a sigh of disappointment. "People usually bring me a few when they come. I used to go to the Orange Shore to pick some myself, but after I lost my sight...maybe next time?"

"I will try," Viserys answered, a smile on his face even if she couldn't see it. "I best go, as the Captain of the Black Walls says that I need to make an appointment at the Freehall for tomorrow."

"Don't feel singled out about it," the maegi answered with a wave of her hand. "They make me do
"Even you?"

"Even maegi are not exempt from needing to work the wheels of a Freehold," she japed. "For good reason, I suppose. Giving no one an exception is what makes it work. Just remember that they aren't making you write on parchment because they don't want you there, but because they must."

Viserys laughed, and once more he turned to the cloth -

"Oh!" she said at last in half-remembrance, causing the prince to look back before he could pass through the cloth. "There was something else!"

"What?"

"Congratulations on becoming a father!" was the blood sorceress's excited words. "I am sure Dany will be so happy to find out she is with child."

Viserys froze.

"How did you know that?" he asked instantly, all warmth and all kindliness melting from him, replaced by an iron heart of suspicion and defensiveness. Promise me, Viserys, his mother whispered again. Promise me. "How did you know what I call her?"

"I know many things," Maera answered, utterly unfazed by the turn in him, by the turn in his voice, the briefest hint of the exile's resolve that lay within his royal heart. "That was but one of them. I will tell you another, if you step to the side for just a moment."

Viserys looked back at her, wondering for a moment if he should do as she wished. If whatever knowledge she might give him was worth doing her command, even such a simple one. Who knew what might happen? Who knew what powers she might have? He swallowed.

Then he stepped to the left. Through the tent's flap came the black cat, the exact same one from before, coming inside with something wiggling beneath it's teeth: a mouse, terrified and yet alive. That was how she got them. That was where the mouse she had given to the candle came from. Reaching down to the cat with cupped hands, the tom dropped the mouse into her waiting hands and she closed them quick, catching it, trapping it, then quickly reached to the exact same crate she had taken the first mouse from and let him fall inside, ready for some future sacrifice.

"You were stood on the tent cloth, so he couldn't get in," Maera said, petting the black tom again as it purred happily at his mistress. "Would you like to know something, Viserys Targaryen?"

He didn't even have the chance to give her an answer.

"You are a man full of doubt about the man you are and what the Targaryens of the past would think of you," Maera said. "Don't. You will be a greater dragon than any of them ever were."

"I...thank you. I will remember that when I take my throne."

"Who knows, mayhaps I shall follow you dragons to Westeros," Maera laughed, finding a cup on the table full of wine. "It might make a pleasant change in scenery."
It took a moment for him to realize what she had just said, what she had meant, but the prince burst into laughter before finally making his way through the cloth and into the outside world once more without interruption. The sky had grown darker still since he had entered, darker and yet brighter for all the stars twinkling over head, the night well and truly begun, yet Rhaegon remained out there, pondering his thoughts till he noticed the prince once more.

"I was beginning to wonder if you might ever emerge," the Captain of the Black Walls rumbled as he rose from the seat, ready to continue. "I trust you haven't been bled so much I will need to find a healer, lest you fall on the steps and break your neck?"

"Thankfully not," the prince said with a smile as they started back on their journey, the prince letting the captain lead.

"She seems sweet and innocent enough, does she not?" Rhaegon asked, seeing the answer on the Targārio's face before he might say it himself. "She is...and she gives little sign that she is mayhaps the most dangerous woman in the world."

"How so?" Viserys asked. "Her glass candles are incredible, but they seem harmless enough."

"You forget what she is," Rhaegon said. "She is a blood sorcerer. Glass candles are only the beginning of her arts, the very same arts that were practiced at Gogossos. Flesh smithing is the word I believe the Andals used for it...and it is fitting, for she can work skin, muscle and bone the way a smith might work iron. She can heal wounds and make the crippled walk again, even mend the ailments of the unborn so that those who might never live can leave the womb, healthy and strong."

Then the guard quietened.

"But at the same time," he said, near a whisper. "She can breed the creations that sorcerers of Gogossos once did. Mate man and beast and bring forth monstrosity. That is not the most dangerous of her gifts, not nearly. Her greatest power is the power to make pestilence."

"She can make diseases?"

"She can make plagues, the likes of which should not be known to man," Rhaegon answered. "The sorcerers of Gogossos fell afoot to a disease of their own making, some say, something that made the skin fall off their bodies like wet parchment. Nine in ten of all the people of that city died begging for death. The rest of the world was spared such a fate solely by the simple fact that the island was too far from traders. Had that not been so..."

The rest went unsaid for there was no need for it to be said. Had the plague that ravaged the Gogossoi reached a trade port, it would have spread across the oceans on plague ships that would have seen it travel as far east as Yi Ti and beyond, just as it would spread across the roads to reach the most isolated, remote land...and bringing death wherever it went. How many could have died? Thousands, mayhaps even hundreds of thousands? Millions upon millions, with whole kingdoms being utterly wiped out? How would that not have been an ending of the nations of man across the world?

They spoke little more than that, little more as they passed through a near mirror of the streets they had gone through before: craftsmen, commons, gardens. Yet these were not true manses. These were buildings of entirely different kinds, buildings where the banners of other realms might fly: he saw the city standards of Myr, Tyrosh, Lys, Braavos and more flying near one another, permanent residences for their ambassadors, needed with the lack of ravens and other such things in Essos.
There was one that he didn't recognize, however, a banner that soared at half mast on the tenth building, with a dragon and chariot of gold on its cloth, placed in opposite corners and yet with riders gazing towards one another.

"Whose banner is that?" he asked. "Sarnor?"

"That is the banner of the Tenth Free City, Volantis' lost little sister," Rhaegon answered, grim. "The rest of the world may have forgotten her, but we have not. They were more like us than the others...and they will be avenged, when the time is right."

It felt like they walked in silence for another ten minutes after that...but then, at last, he saw it.

The Freehall.

Though it was less than its true parent in Valyria had been, less than the Hall of the Freeholders he had just seen with his own two eyes, it was unquestionably a grand structure in its own right, as large as the Dragonpit of King's Landing had been...and just like its Valyrian mother, it was place of domes. Fourteen towers and fourteen wings jutted from a vast, square central structure, a reflection of the Freehold of which it had been a part, and dome upon dome rose above, four that held up a single one whose golden summit rose into a belftower that would sound to call the Freeholders on every day of meeting. It was forged of the same seamless masonry as Dragonstone, as Valyria, and every corner of its fourteen points bore the image of one of the Fourteen Gods: Balerion the huntress, Vhagar the warrior, Meraxes the artist, Syrax of the sea, all four were there, as were their ten kin, all of them surrounded by choirs of dragonkin and all of them with vast wings that were the walls of the towering structure.

It was the largest building he had ever seen in his life with his own two eyes that was not ruined or of the past. It was even larger than the Red Keep, for where the Red Keep was many different buildings, this was one...and it felt as if there was a symbolism in that, subtle and yet there, as subtle as how the maesters once wrote of how the "Seven Kingdoms are", instead of how "the Seven Kingdoms is" as they did after Jaehaerys the Wise truly took seven realms and made them one. Yet there was one great difference that separated it from the capital of Westeros, one difference the likes of which would have been unimaginable across the Narrow Sea.

It was forever open. Even now, in the dead of night, it was open and ready for petitioners to make preparations for the following morning. Even now it was ready, its doors kept open and more a feature to protect the building from poor weather and the wind than to keep anyone out. It was a striking difference from the places of Westeros, for the Red Keep was exactly that, a keep, a fortress, a place that was meant to be kept closed and defended and guarded by design. The Freehall was the opposite, open and welcoming, with a place for every man and every issue beneath its domes, and it was up its steps they climbed, Rhaegon seeming filled with pride by every foot he placed in front of the other.

"I see you are impressed by the Freehall as much as I was, when I first lain my eyes upon it," Rhaegon said quietly as they climbed the steps, filled with what seemed to be half-contained excitement. "It is beautiful, isn't it?"

"It is, but I would rather see it in daytime."

"You will get your chance," the captain laughed. "It shines like a gem when the sun is up. That makes it beautiful indeed. Come! We have forms to fill!"
"Is it truly that simple?" the prince asked as they stepped through the threshold and entered the building proper, where yet another great difference to the Red Keep was revealed, for where that castle had a great hall that led from the entrance to the Iron Throne itself, every step watched over by dragon skulls...

...the Freehall had a small room, about the size of his bedchamber. On the left side were benches, ahead was a much grander door, the true door, that led to the hall proper, the beating heart of a true Freehold, as Valyria had been, and on the right there were more benches, but more importantly, a wall. A false wall. A wall of iron bars, behind which sat a tired looking clerk, a Volantene, hair long and eyes violet, reading silently and with nothing else to do in a dark room that was barely at all lit.

"It is," Rhaegon answered, leading the prince to the bars, to the small opening beyond the dungeon like grate. "And this is the one and only man with whom you need to speak."

"You have a matter to discuss with the Triarchs and the Freeholders?" the clerk asked, looking towards the prince with tired eyes as he slid his book aside. "What is the nature of your visit? Are you here on matters of trade, diplomacy, military or to deliver a missive?"

"I am Viserys, of the house Targaryen," he said, straightening himself to full regal stature. "I am here to seek allies to reclaim my throne."

"Military and diplomatic, then," the clerk continued, weary. "Is this meeting a private one already arranged, or are you in need of an appointment?"

This...is different, the prince couldn't help but think. Is this what it was like for my father's courtiers? Surely not?

"I...suppose the second."

"Have you already been given the proper forms so that your visit might be recorded?"

"I am afraid not."

"Then you will have need of a paper?" the Volantene asked. "One moment, then. Mind your eyes."

The Volantene rose from his seat and walked across the room, his steps masked half by darkness and half by the iron bars that separated the two and protected him from the anger of any man. But despite the lack of light, the clerk moved with practiced steps and knowledge of where every last detail was within the room with but the littlest light, making his way towards a shelf that Viserys could barely see from where he was stood, hearing only the clattering of metal and the scratchy flutterings of a piece of parchment. Steps followed towards the far end of the room - and searingly bright light flooded the chamber as he opened a door to reveal a burning fireplace that bathed the room with its warmth and revealed that, in his hand, were a set of long tongs, shaped carefully to hold the parchment in their grip.

And place the parchment in them he did, carefully making sure the sheet was stretched taut between its steel fangs before the clerk carefully gripped it with both hands, as as man might grip a spear, before plunging it into the flames, towards an iron block Viserys could barely see...and pulled it out again not even a heartbeat later. The parchment smoked and steamed from where the metal had scarred its surface, yet the clerk cared not as he brought it over to the table, leaving it but a few seconds before undoing the bolts and removing it, placing it upon the wood and sliding it through the armored gratings towards Viserys to allow the prince to see.
From that brief moment of fire, the blank parchment was covered in burns...and those burns were letters, lines, boxes, questions. They were not perfect things; some of them were blotchy, others faint where the metal had not been heated enough to burn the pigskin or pressed enough to properly imprint.

Byt despite those faults, despite those few errors, it had taken but a heartbeat to create something that was readable and workable both, something that was needed to support the backbone of the Volantene Freehold and its unceasing hunger for forms and letters and all the other instruments of governance. It was a thing that they had inherited from old Valyria itself, he knew, something that had led the Ghiscari of ancient days long past to mock the young Freehold as a nation of "bookish people", a land of teachers and thinkers and philosophers, not warriors...a reputation that Valyria had eagerly embraced before teaching the Ghiscari the lesson that their rightful place in the world was grovelling on their knees, submitting before the Freeholders that had outthought, and so outfought, even their mighty armies, taking their strengths for themselves.

The source of such victories was before him. Tests. Forms. Standards. Examinations. Study. Hours upon hours of study. Even dragons were useless without tactics and strategy to make use of them, and tactics and strategy were the foundations of war of all kinds. Even the brigands and killers of the Kingswood Brotherhood had known that.

"Simply check the required boxes," the clerk said, uncapping an inkwell and cutting off the tip of a feather to give him a fresh quill, sliding it all through the grate, speaking words that came with the tired voice of a man who had said them tens of thousands of times before. "You will also need to declare an appropriate reason for your request to speak before the Triarchs and the Freeholders, for consideration of the matter at hand. Should your reasoning be unsuitable, your request for a meeting will be denied and you will receive no reply."

"Should it be suitable you will be notified prior to the next session and given an appointment," he continued, the prince only able to stare back at him in wordless surprise. "Should you yourself be unavailable to attend, your kin may attend to speak on your behalf assuming that they are of appropriate age and not in the midst of a legal matter."

Viserys could only look to his escort in answer, his bemused expression of disbelief saying a thousand words. Rhaegon laughed in answer.

"Different from how things typically happen in Westeros, I take it?" the Volantene asked. "Do your people not need to submit forms to ask for..."

"...a petition?" Viserys asked, the captain of the guards nodding in acceptance. "Most simply come up to the castle with their requests whenever the king holds court."

"Is there not a day he must always have it?" the Volantene clerk asked, confused, the practices of a realm with a king as alien to him as the practices of a true Freehold were to the prince. "And how does he determine whether a...petitioneer is allowed to enter or not?"

"It is the king who decides what is meaningful enough for a petitioner to be accepted," Viserys answered. "If it is something that is too low for him, then he can send them away. Some might be punished if their matter is frivolous, as it wastes his time on matters that are more important."

"Dārys," the clerk murmured bitterly in High Valyrian.
"Indeed he is a king," Viserys answered, knowing the meaning of the word, knowing that it was one of the first his father had taught him.

Or so he thought.

"It is not king that word means, though mayhaps it does in Westeros now," Rhaegon explained. "In true High Valyrian, it means a different thing entirely. It means tyrant."

Before Viserys could answer, before he even had a chance to vent the anger that began to rise at the accusation, an accusation that had been grounds for duels to the death in Old Valyria, duels fought with sorcery and blade and dragonfire, Rhaegon raised his hand with soothing swiftness, seeing in an instant the change of expression on the Targaryen's cheeks.

"The same term was given to the Kings of Sarnor," Rhaegon explained fairly and quickly. "Aurion of Qohor called himself such as well, even if the term better translates into the Common Tongue as...emporium, I think?"

"Emperor," the clerk corrected with a wave of his hand. "Darys is a term for all men who rule without the consent of the ruled. They named one of our very own Triarchs, Horonno, the same during the Century of Blood, may the Fourteen forsake him still."

"Horonno?" Viserys asked, distracted from the veiled accusation by the name and then need to fill out the papers he had been given, taking the quill and dipping it into the ink well to start. "I'm not familiar with that Triarch."

"Most Westerosi wouldn't be," Rhaegon explained. "He was a tiger, as many of us are still, and a tiger elected every year for forty years. He brought Volantis many victories. He broke the back of Myr and marched his forces through its gates and raised the Volantene banner in its squares, stunned the Ghiscari with a repeat of the old wars and curbed their ambitions, once and for all, then stormed the piers of Lys and took the city in a day, leading the men through the streets on foot."

"His victories in the name of restoring the Freehold had made him a popular man," the clerk agreed. "There was not a year that went by that he did not keep his seat with more votes than the other two Triarchs combined. But the elections tired him, so he tried to use his power to name himself Triarch for life."

"There are few things men love more than victories, good Viserys, but one's rights is one of them," Rhaegon nodded in agreement. "Horonno violated those rights, and so the Volantenes, even then, had each of his legs and each of his arms tied to an elephant so that he might be torn limb from limb. That alone was not enough to kill him, however, for the blood sorcerers of that time were still strong."

"They stopped him from bleeding to death, to make sure he could feel the pain of it all," the clerk explained. "And when the pain of that was ended, they threw the limbless lump that was left of him into a pit of hungry tigers. The sorcerers kept him screaming for near enough half an hour before he was beyond even their abilities."

"Seven hells," the prince gasped.

"There are few things Valyrians took more seriously than their rights, and none are closer to being Valyria's heir than Volantis," Rhaegon said. "When Horonno saw fit to try and make himself Triarch for life, his acts attacked not only the rivals who might see to try and take his place, they attacked
every Volantene and the rights and laws that separate us from the Dothraki."

"Even the dream of restoring the Freehold weighs very little in comparison to destroying the dream upon which it was founded," the clerk agreed. "In over five thousand years, neither Valyria nor her Tyrian or Orosii sisters ever had a king. Even when they were still little more than shepherds, they governed as groups through councils of their wisest men and women."

"But that is enough talking about the past, as I myself do need to deliver something as well," Rhaegon half-japed, Viserys moving to the side to allow him to reach the table and the clerk past its armored walls. "Has Triarch Laerion retired for the night?"

"He has yet to retire, yes," the clerk answered as the Targaryen checked a box marking it as a military matter. "But he has requested not to be disturbed except for the most urgent of matters so that he may make his preparations for tomorrow's assembly without interruption. I take it must be an important one?"

"Indeed it is," the Captain of the Black Walls answered. "He is a Triarch, yes, but he is also Ėliejentys of all Volantene azantyri. All matters to do with defence of the city are to do with him."

Viserys ears perked at the sound of the High Valyrian. It was different than he had been taught by his mother and father and brother and by the Grand Maester. Older. Purer. This was true High Valyrian, untainted by the influences of the Common Tongues of Westeros, but even still he knew the words. Ėliejentys. First Commander. Azantyri. Armies. This Triarch was not just a Triarch, he was the designated leader of all of the city's forces, whose commands went by default, even if they might be overruled by a vote amongst the Freeholders themselves. That was a privilege and a power not given lightly.

"Then I will see it to him."

"Make sure you do," Rhaegon answered...

...before reaching into his coats and into a pocket within and pulling out a sealed iron cylinder, a thing barely big enough to contained the scroll within. capped with a thick hunk of metal that was itself covered in Valyrian numerals and glyphs all connected to a mechanism that lay beneath, a combination lock. The clerk reached out for it, ready to take it from his hands, but Rhaegon pulled it back at the last moment.

"Do not attempt to open the cylinder," the captain warned. "This information is beyond price. Should the wrong numbers be entered or the container be pierced, the contents will be destroyed to keep them from our enemy's hands."

Only after the clerk nodded and nodded grimly did the Captain of the Black Walls surrender the steel cylinder to him, never placing it on the table, never letting it out of his grip till the clerk had his hand upon it and not even letting go until it had been pulled behind the iron bars and out of his easy reach.

And only then did the Targaryen realize why the Captain of the Black Walls himself had come to escort him to the Freehall. Only then did he realize why he had came to him after dinner and not earlier in the day. It was not about him. It had never been about him. It had never been about Viserys and his need to speak with the Triarchs to get aid for his return to the Seven Kingdoms. Rhaegon had something else in mind from the moment he had knocked the door...and it was something that Laena had known about, dining and japing with him and his sister all whilst she had her own aims.
And that aim was to use him as a cover for this one moment. This one message. What secrets could it possibly hold to merit such importance? News of Westeros and an opening the Freeholders might exploit? News of Braavos and of the opportunity to right the defeats of four hundred years before? Or was it not news, but something even more valuable? Secrets to exploit? Men to blackmail? Or mayhaps it was secrets of a kind long thought lost to the world, secrets of sorcery, secrets of knowledge... mayhaps even secrets of dragonkind? Or maybe it wasn't even a message at all. Mayhaps it was an item, like a glass candle, or something to do with Gogossos, or Asshai, or even Old Valyria itself.

Or maybe, just maybe, there was nothing inside it at all and it was nothing but a trap, to see if he would care or try to find out more for himself.

If it was, then it was a trap he was intent on evading. A more prideful prince might have done something, tried to peek at the cylinder as it passed him by. A more prideful prince might have said something, asking about what was so important that it had to be given in such a manner. A more prideful prince might have even allowed his temper to rise and refuse to be used in such a manner, revealing the deceit.

Viserys didn't look.

Viserys didn't ask.

Viserys did nothing.

Nothing but keep his hand scribbling upon the parchment. He had his pride, let none say that he didn't, but that pride was tempered by a gift of pragmatism, given to him by years of experience. This was not his battle to fight, not his problem to solve, not his cause to die for. He had enough troubles as it was without needing to intrude on anyone else's matters. That was the key to surviving in Essos as an exile as long as he had. That was the key to surviving when the Usurper's blades were always but a heartbeat behind, following their footsteps like shadows. That was how one survived the fall of their dynasty and the loss of their throne and castle and home. They kept their attentions solely on that goal and upon no other. They kept the attentions of others off of themselves, for they had no need of more enemies than they already had.

And Viserys had many enemies and few friends.

Across the Narrow Sea were a great many lords who might rise for him upon his return, but just as many were the ones that would fight to the last man to prevent him from reclaiming the throne, afraid of what he might do to them and their lines after the last of the Baratheon banners falls into the mud. The Lannisters were one of them, for Tywin Lannister had put his niece and nephew to the sword to secure the rebel victory...despite being called to arms again and again by the man who had fought and bled with him on the Stepstones, by Aerys, his onetime best friend and the man he had served as Hand of the King. Their treachery would have to be punished.

Then there were the Arryns, who had refused a direct order from the crown to apprehend the Stark and Baratheon boys who had been there at the Eyrie as wards, despite the fact that the heir to Winterfell had shouted, in public, his desire for Rhaegar to come out and die...a threat to do harm against a member of the ruling house, a threat of regicide, a crime that bore the death penalty in the code of laws that Jaehaerys the Wise had made and had even existed before then, when the Seven Kingdoms had still been separate from one another. Their treachery would have to be punished.
Then there were the Starks, who had unjustly and unfairly accused the prince of a crime that he had never committed, of acts that he would never have done, slandering Viserys' beloved brother's reputation for naught but their own error. As if that was not enough, they threatened his father, a man who had done nothing except act against those who had first acted against him, as he had at Duskendale, years before, where he could have came with an army of knights and yet came with but a single knight of the Kingsguard, confident and trusting in the loyalty of his vassal lord...trust that was repaid with starvation in a dungeon. He was not the Mad King they tried to call him. Aerys had done nothing wrong. His father had done nothing wrong. Their treachery would have to be punished.

And there could be no question about the Baratheons. Once the closest of all of the dragon's allies, a dynasty that would not even exist were it not for Targaryen gratitude and generosity, they had time and time again been rewarded for their servitude...and how did they repay the Targaryens for the generosity that they were given? With blood. With fire. With usurpation. With the slaughter of their kin by marriage, for Rhaelle Targaryen, the Usurper's own grandmother, had still been alive during the fighting. It was said that she had passed from the grief of hearing that her grandson had killed her great nephew, his own cousin.

That was consanguicide, the murder of kin. There could be no forgiveness for that.

But before he could seek out and punish his enemies, to deliver them justice for their crimes, he had to have allies. Volantis could be the greatest of them all, the centerpiece that raises the Targaryen banner for its return to Westeros. They were his last, best hope. If he was ever to avenge his family, if he was to ever avenge his beloved Aerys and Rhaella and Rhaegar and even little Rhaenys and Aegon, he would need their help. He needed their help. He needed Volantis.

And so he turned a blind eye to it all. He did nothing as the cylinder rested in the clerk's hands. He said nothing as the clerk weighed it in his hands, looking to Rhaegon curiously only to place it into a pocket. He needed Volantis far more than Volantis needed him, so he did and said nothing as the Volantene rose from his seat on the other side of the table to leave, to deliver it to its master.

All he did was write the last few sentences, the last of his reasonings for coming to the city and seeking an audience with the Triarchy, then slide the finished sheet through, ready to be handled whilst he was gone.

And on the way back to the manse, he said nothing more.

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