

Down a Rabbit Hole to Westeros

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Down a Rabbit Hole to Westeros

by [Lamia_Kuei](#)

Summary

A SI into Selyse Florent, later Selyse Baratheon. Refusing this time around to be vexed by a mustache, lack of indoor plumbing, and no more guacamole in favor of keeping her eyes on the prize: Surviving the upcoming Long Night and not letting Melisandre go Full Melisandre.

Brightwater Keep: Childhood 1

It happened in May. May Day, May Day. My mind was wandering. Unfortunately for me, this time it was a literal thing and I went to sleep knowing exactly who I was and where, and when, and woke up somewhere completely else.

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

I envied the sci-fi end of the spectrum in cases like these. Like in Trek. Ridiculously unstable Empire that espouses stabbings for military promotion purposes aside, at least they had computers.

Here? I nearly made myself sicker by using up valuable reoperation energy fighting off some robed guy trying to stick leeches on me.

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

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

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

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

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

I punched ineffectually some more when I remembered that I'd be getting a moustache and I was the wrong gender for that to be acceptable. I'd have to invent waxing. For my face.

When my only experience with such methods was cringelaughing while watching the relevant scene from 40-Year-Old Virgin.

After Maester Bryan judged that I made a full recovery and I was presented to my mother for inspection, I set about with a will. Was I absolutely sure I'd end up as Mrs. Stannis the Mannis? No. But given what I know, I might as well prepare because as the Starks say, Winter is Coming.

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

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

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

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

I took up music lessons. Singing and playing the harp and mountain dulcimer. I used the excuse of needing to increase lung capacity and strengthening my diaphragm to take up a routine of jogging from one bailey to another within Brightwater Keep, belting out scales as I

went. Every so often I would amuse the guards by asking if they'd noticed or not if this time I could hold a note longer. Fortunately, I wasn't tone deaf. I sounded pretty good, actually.

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

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

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

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

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

I gathered up the evidence and wrote out a report of conclusions, on how the merchant was cheating us and depended on multiple servants not knowing what was what in a shipment of

dry goods in addition to general illiteracy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

As for the servants, this incident made it so that it made sense to start instituting a system of checks. Major servants were taught at minimum to be able to read the numbers and names of the most common supplies and goods that would be coming into the keep and to use the weights on the scales and balances kept in the kitchen. Goods coming in would be weighed and measured, opened and sifted through, and undergo another weighing and measuring before acceptance. Discrepancies must be brought to the attention of the merchant and any severe conflicts would be brought to the attention of the steward. And woe betide the merchant who gained the attention of Lord Florent himself for attempted cheating. Weekly inventory would be done, with younger servants made to follow a more experienced servant to learn how to properly do the counts and writing for it.

Brightwater Keep: Childhood 2

The Florents were a pretty unpleasant bunch, though not like the Freys or anything heinous like the Boltons; they were a pack of pretentious snobs persistently clinging to past glory because of descent from Gardner Kings' lines. Putting on airs. Generally deficit in the humor department aside from ye-olde-time-y staples such as flatulence jokes. I began to try lifting up the quality of humor and entertainment in an attempt at self preservation. I would be waiting for a while before getting stuck with Stannis and he already wasn't a barrel of laughs. Not to mention that clown of horrors that is Patches. Fuck me, I was going to have to live with Patches. I wasn't going to go my days without laughing genuinely.

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

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

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

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

I didn't plan to have them idolize lying liars, assholes who double deal, and the idea that everyday we were hustling. I was bored and missed unlimited streaming access to the

internet. But if somehow I managed to give any of these Florents some idea of street savvy, some idea that chivalry was institutional hypocrisy barely holding back the insane amounts of cruelty and violence of this world such as the Boltons or Lannisters could unleash, it would be worth it.

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

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

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

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

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

He was so well disposed to me that we worked together on a project to discover the principles of Mendelian genetic inheritance laws with pea plants. When we get to writing it up, we’re going to probably call them the Bryanic Inheritance Laws or something suitably meaty like that. The results from the first generation were so interesting that he immediately started a program of carefully recorded crossbreeding. I left him to it, telling him to get

results from at least five generations of plants. Afterwards, I recommended that if he wanted a better response from the Citadel, to have some of his other maester friends conduct their own experiments and to share their results with him. Multiple people with conclusive results, I reasoned to him, would necessarily mean better chance of acceptance and accolades.

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

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

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

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

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

It was fun.

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

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

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

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

Everything was going so well.

Brightwater Keep: Accursed Puberty

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

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

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

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

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

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

StorySelyse probably let cumulative years of low self esteem and lack of feminine friendship bring her down. I didn't come from that world and I had different references of beauty to bolster myself. I experimented for weeks before this point, but I finally got a mixture of

honey, sugar, and lemon juice that worked for hair removal, with trial and error on my leg hairs. Of course all the ladies thought I was insane at first, but then my mustache grew in. And then they were supportive (though skeptical). My handmaid, Megga, was begging me not to make her do it, sure that she would be dismissed without references for hurting a Lady, but I smeared on my perfected batch with a spoon to my upper lip, pressed a strip of cloth onto the mess, braced myself against my chair with a death grip on the chair arms, grit my jaw, and ordered her to rip.

Well, it hurt like a motherfucker, as I expected. Melessa and Rhea both shrieked when I bellowed like a boar stuck with a spear. Megga burst into tears. But I was already reaching for my hand mirror.

“It’s gone. It’s GONE!” Hot damn!

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

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

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

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

I was still mad about the lack of pockets in ladies wear. For daily wear, I commissioned Chanel style jackets with lovely four pockets on the fronts, in black or blue with white braided cord trims, to subtly reference my House colors. Boucle wasn’t available, so I settled

on broadcloth instead. Chic. Practical. I called them Florent Jackets, which were quickly adopted by the rest of the ladies and they were unisex enough for the men and boys to ask for their own versions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

My family cried out with impatience. I nodded to Megga, who pushed hard on the door; it swung open with a dramatic bang. I was standing with my back facing the waiting crowd,

with a hand on my hip. I had Megga make everybody stand clear to give me a runway space beforehand. I gave a smile over my shoulder and spun, before striding forward, doing my best Naomi Campbell strut.

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

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

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

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

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

“Greetings, my lord,” I said.

Lord Florent gestured so that I may rise, standing tall and confidently meeting his eye. His gaze was friendly, though assessing as he looked at my tousled upswept hair and tight black dress, relieved only by the glitter of my sapphire flowers. I was giving some Hollywood bombshell realness. Was he able to comprehend it, or was I too modern, too alien?

“I’m not a man who knows about fashions and dresses and other such things,” he said. “So may I just say that you look wonderful? My niece, the clever, storytelling, musical Selyse. And now people may say, lovely, in truth. By the gods. It’s miraculous a change.”

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

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

Everybody all laughed.

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

“Soon? How soon?” Melessa asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Aye. Nervous, are you?”

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

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

So here it is; finally a touchstone event that would have me figuring out when I was in the story.

Harrenhal: Crapsack at Imminent Tippage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

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

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

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

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

Of course. Small talk was small talk across dimensions.

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

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

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

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

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

It had to be Stannis.

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

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

"It's my turn, Selyse, what's taking so long?" Rhea tapped my shoulder.

"Just a Baratheon."

"Lord Robert? He's so very handsome," she giggled. Giggled. Ugh, honestly.

"... He doesn't impress me much," I passed the far-eye to her.

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

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

“I like his eyebrows.”

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

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

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

Oh, it was bad.

“Is that the King?” Lord Florent reached for the far-eye, astonished.

“Gnarly,” I muttered, unable to help myself.

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

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

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

“Poor fool.”

“Why would you say that?” Melessa asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Well. Deep breaths. Time to work.

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

Lord and Lady Florent were announced first, followed by Cousin Alekyne with Melessa on his arm. Uncle Colin entered next with Rhea and then it was Imry with me and mother on either side.

I'm not going to lie. As we were shown to our assigned seating for the feast by a servant, people literally stopped talking upon seeing us pass by. We were the Girl from Ipanema, we were Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell entering the cruise ship dining room in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. We were slaying.

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

"Florents? Did I hear right? Those are Florents? Really!?"

"I thought Florent girls were plain!"

"They look incredible!"

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

"I'm not sure I like how they are all looking at us," Rhea murmured to me.

"It's envy," I replied.

"Oh," Rhea looked a little surprised. "I've never been envied before."

"I think I like it," Melessa chirped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I do not see her as joking, either.

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

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

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

And... Brandon Stark asks me to dance. Huh.

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

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

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

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

"I disagree with that," I retort with a smile.

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

It was excruciating. He tops it by asking me what my problem was, more or less.

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

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

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

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

He scoffs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But-!”

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

I nod reassuringly to mother and we step out.

Afterwards, to further illustrate that I was somehow trapped in a farce, Robert Baratheon starts striding towards me. I brace myself, but Imry beat me to the punch.

“Are you going to call my sister ugly too? Fuck off then!” Imry glares at him.

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

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

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

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

Robert stares at me, agog at the casual profanity.

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

Robert chuckles.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Robert laughed again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I squeezed his hand back.

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

Imry shook his head.

“Maybe Uncle Colin is free this time.”

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

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

Our choice of attire was subject of much gawking. The presence of our personal guards prevented us from being accosted, but there was much leering from uncouth men and scandalised whispering on the part of women. I had worried about Melessa and Rhea, but they admitted to me from the start that they liked that my designs resulted in skirts that weren’t heavy and that they didn’t see what was so very scandalous about our clothes in comparison to our first exposure to Dornish fashion. I loved the opulence, patterns, cutouts,

plunging necklines, and gauziness myself after seeing Dornish attendees. But as I was amongst Andals, it was better for me to be suggestive with form fitting instead of actual skin baring, Rhoynish style.

We ended each day exhausted by walking and our heads full of sights and sounds, writing down our observations into our notebooks late into the night.

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

Chapter End Notes

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

Brightwater Keep: Robert's Rebellion and Aftermath

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thank you, Uncle. Travel well!”

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

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

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

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

With the celebratory atmosphere and Lannister forces bolstering the Goldcloaks, King’s Landing will likely never be safer to explore. While Lord and Lady Florent schmoozed and

made sure to be seen, us cousins set out to explore the biggest city in Westeros. We circled, happily lost in the marketplaces, until we learned to orient ourselves according to where the Red Keep, Dragonpit, and Sept of Baelor were in relation to each other over the horizon.

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

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

We took in the pageantry of the wedding ceremony of King Robert and Queen Cersei at the Sept of Baelor, we feasted and danced afterwards, and enjoyed the wedding tourney. Lord Florent and Lady Florent worked through whatever Vale acquaintances they had and finally managed to wrangle Lord Arryn into accepting a dinner with us. To lower the presumed pressure on Lord Arryn, Lord Florent also invited Bronze Yohn Royce and his family.

Us cousins put on a fine show that evening. The conversation was sparkling, as we told anecdotes of our explorations of King's Landing, made jokes, and entertained before the food was served by singing songs, and playing instruments. Imry asked that we bring out our slates and chalk after dinner and so we teamed off and played rounds of Pictionary. Alekyne and Imry took Lysa Arryn into their team and Rhea and I teamed up with Andar and Robar. While we were occupied by the game, Lord and Lady Florent were laying out praises of our capabilities. It was self evident that us cousins were comfortable in mixed company, able to entertain ourselves with talent and wit. It was on Lord and Lady Florent to reveal our ability to handle household matters and Lord Florent was unstinting in praise of his hopes for Alekyne's future management of Brightwater Keep and holdings, speaking of the success of the ideas that Alekyne had discussed with him that were already improving crop yields and land fertility.

King's Landing: For Science

Chapter Notes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How did this seem to the Royces? Intimidating, mysterious, odd. Fortunately, our musings were not purely theoretical. They did not really understand our new appreciation for the filthy lucre gained from trade, but Andar understood immediately the benefits of producing more food and then being able to preserve it in easily transportable ways when it came to sustaining troops on the move in war. Runestone being a seaside holding and so close to Gulltown also meant that even he understood the urgency that I had for hammering down a

method so simple, that possibly functionally illiterate captains could use to successfully find longitude while out in the open sea. And for that, Alekyne had to insist as Rhea's brother that if Andar thought he could reduce her to overseeing the household and arranging occasional feasts while giving birth when she could be the key for a mathematical revolution in sea trade, he had another thing coming.

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

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

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

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

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

They were present for the 3 month long mark of Rhea's canning experiment. Now, I had warned Rhea strenuously to take all precautions when it came to using human test subjects. We ceremoniously opened up some of the jars, (saving the others for another 3 months. I figure a three month keep time was too ambitious already, but who knew? That's what

experimentation was for.) and fed some to pigeons, chickens, and caught feral cats. She had ambitiously prepared some with sausages and fish. Now canned sardines was obviously a thing in my old dimension, along with Spam, but this was simple water boiling, not pressurized canning, so I was the most leery of those and sadly was proven correct when the cats perished after round of bad suffering, where we had to euthanize them. Rhea was a little disheartened, but I was encouraged by the fact that my own hypothesis that high acid foods (which, by the way, litmus existed already in Westeros. Huge load off my back because I certainly had no idea how else to conduct this most basic of chemical experiments without it. Apparently it came from ground up lichen. Amazing.) would prove better preserved. It was then that we got some servants to find some friendly-enough denizens of Flea Bottom and to escort them to the Foxhole.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Andar quietly congratulated Rhea, who beamed at him.

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

Lysa wavered.

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

She agreed and I wrote down the earliest possible date the jars could be opened into my journal. We continued on, entertaining the Royces and Lysa. By now, both Lysa and Cersei were pregnant and it showed. Lysa bowed to Lord Arryn’s dictates and remained at the Red Keep for her health, so Rhea, Delena and I would go to keep her company about every other day.

Kings Landing: It's Time for Tea

Chapter Notes

Warning: mention of a miscarriage. Lysa Arryn, you know how it goes.

Inevitably, we met Cersei. Now here, I cautioned Rhea and Delena prior to stepping foot in the Red Keep to be very circumspect indeed. After all, the unmitigated lunatic thinks everybody who isn't a Lannister is an enemy. Our appearances were of course an easy aspect for commentary, so the very first instance of Cersei seeing us in the halls of the Red Keep on the way to Lysa's chambers were her opportunity. We stopped and curtsied upon her approach.

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

"Selyse Florent, Your Grace."

"Rhea Florent, Your Grace."

"Delena Florent, Your Grace."

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

"Why are you here?" Cersei finally indulged her curiosity.

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

"Sewing."

"Yes, Your Grace," we coincidentally chorused back at her.

Shit. She might take that as a mockery.

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

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

even Delena blushed or dropped her gaze.

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

When we went to see Lysa, I warned her that we had come to the attention of Cersei and that it was her prerogative and highly likely that she might order us to go to tea with her in the future, in order to inconvenience Lysa, just because she could. Lysa sadly nodded, knowing that was precisely the sort of thing Cersei would do, but she smiled when we all said that we of course much preferred her.

It happened exactly so. The next visit, we could not go through the halls without notice and in fact she probably had servants waiting to warn her. She swept in our way and invited us to tea. We acquiesced readily and followed her. We sat down in the space allowed us by her ladies-in-waiting, Westermen all, who were giving not so subtle once overs of our clothing and appearances now that we were properly in the same room.

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

More silence.

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

Rhea and Delena looked towards me.

“It was all my idea, Your Grace.”

Her stare snapped to me.

“You?”

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

“Pockets.”

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

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“And your dresses. So... tight.”

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

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

“Yes, you are plain, indeed.”

This bitch, here.

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

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

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

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

“How old are you, Selyse Florent?”

“I am nineteen.”

“Yet still unmarried.”

“Just as you say, Your Grace.”

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

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

“Oh, was it Cersei?” Lysa whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Everybody nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kings Landing: Negotiations & Paperwork

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

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

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

“Examine and open these jars.”

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

The servant came back and laid out forks and spoons.

Jon took a bite of pickle.

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

“Good stuff, Jon,” Robert finally said. “Still, what is this about? I see jars. I see food.”

“How old would you say this food is?”

“Well, now,” Robert took a second scoop of jam. “Still sweet. Not off, not at all. Can’t say. Seems fresh.”

Jon looked around the table, inviting guesses.

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

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

There were small exclamations of surprise.

“Extraordinary,” Varys chuckled.

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

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

Pycelle sputtered at the names of women.

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

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

Stannis grimaced.

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

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

“And navies,” Stannis growled.

Finally Robert comprehended and he grinned, slapping the table.

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

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

“Steel?”

“Tin, Your Grace.”

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

“Just so,” Lord Arryn nodded.

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

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

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

“Your Grace-”

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

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

The rest of the Small Council meeting went on as usual, though Robert managed to stay awake because he was spooning jam into his mouth at regular intervals. Afterwards, before

Robert could leave, Jon indicated that he wanted to speak privately with Robert and Stannis. Robert made an impatient gesture and sat back down, picking up another jar of jam.

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

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

Stannis’ jaw worked.

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

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

“Selyse Florent,” Jon huffed.

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

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

“Yes, Your Grace.”

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

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

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

Robert was thinking.

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

Robert laughed.

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

Robert made a chopping gesture.

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

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

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

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

“Now, Stannis. Do you know the lady?”

Stannis shook Robert’s hand off.

“No.”

“Ah. Then I will tell you about her.”

“I would rather you not.”

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

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

“How do you know this of her!?”

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

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

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

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

Stannis just glared at Robert.

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

The gall of Robert telling him to mind his manners!

Robert picked up the second jar of jam and grinned.

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

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

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

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

Lord Arryn raised his brows.

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

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

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

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

Now. The text on how to tin jar preserve food produced will be freely available to other lords to reproduce as they will for their own holdings. I imagine the North will adopt this most quickly. We cannot and will not guarantee the results of any others’ tin jarring. Nor will we

be held responsible for any errors in their production. I stipulate this most strongly. This is similar to brewing, after all, only more refined. The next, logical step.”

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

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

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

Lord Florent smiled in a smug way.

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

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

“You mean to drown us in paperwork,” Stannis scoffed.

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

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

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

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

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

He scowled at Lord Florent.

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

“My lord?” Lord Arryn asked.

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

Lord Florent gave Stannis an approving look.

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

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

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

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

They went over the dowry documents that Lord Florent brought with him, making amendments and deletions as they went. Finally, the business was done and the last page was signed and sealed with wax.

“Lord Stannis. Now that you are to be my good-nephew, I expect that you visit the Foxhole. Selyse is eager to meet you properly. She stipulates that you bring the one you trust the most in the world along with you when you do pay us a visit. When may we expect you?”

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

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

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

Lord Florent smiled another privately amused smile.

“Apparently it is not so comfortable for newcomers entering the Foxhole for the first time, my lord. And we do wish for you to be comfortable.”

King's Landing: First Meetings

The next day, Ser Davos Seaworth followed Stannis as they were led by a servant down the streets away from the Red Keep to the Florent manse.

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

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

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

Stannis grunted at this observation.

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

“Welcome, my lord and ser, to the Foxhole,” Lord Florent was waiting for them in the entry hall.

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

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

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

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

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

"I'll leave you with some pretence of privacy," Alekyne said, turning his chair to face away from the group, picking up a book and opening it. "I wish for you two to have a productive conversation."

He picked up a cup of tea.

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

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

"Why?" Stannis practically barked.

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

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

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

Stannis grunted.

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

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

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

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

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

“You invented this?”

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

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

“Thank you.”

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

“Now, my last gifts.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

With Stannis, his excitement could be mistaken for aggression.

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

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

had to find the angle of the sun during noon. A table listed which line of latitude the sun should be above on that particular day, indicated by the angle taken.

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

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

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

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

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

“The Westerosi Practical Navigator, a method of Navigation and Nautical Astronomy. By Rhea Florent and Selyse Florent, with Maester Bryan and Maester Willis. Rhea Florent is not only responsible for the tin jarring?”

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

“And these tables are accurate?”

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

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

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

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

Selyse smiled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stannis mutely nodded. Alekyne chuckled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh. Well, then. Copper sheathing, secured with copper nails, to prevent fouling of hulls. I hypothesize that it would be more effective, not to mention cheaper, to use an alloy of copper and zinc for the purpose. New rigging and sail shape and arrangement, that would allow for

sailing closer to the wind than ever before. Masts made not from a single trunk of a tree only, but dovetailed planks secured by bands of iron, like for barrels, and further enforced by coiling ropes all the up the mast shafts, such that you can carry more sail than before. I might as well investigate the ideal hull shape, as well.”

Selyse calmly sipped her tea after this extraordinarily ambitious litany.

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

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

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

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

“Well. I did come here to work.”

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

Stannis blinked, before nodding.

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

“A very fortunate match,” Davos commented, as Stannis was not going to say anything.

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

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

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

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

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

“You may.”

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

Stannis blinked some more.

“And not the King?”

Selyse raised her eyebrows at the idea.

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

Alekyne leaned in next to Davos.

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

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

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

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

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

“My lord?” Davos asked.

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

Stannis scowled, but nodded, allowing the familiarity.

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

Davos snorted at this new, strangely appropriate word. Stannis ground his teeth.

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

Alekyne stopped and looked Stannis in the eye.

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

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

"I will behave with utmost propriety," Stannis finally concedes.

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

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

"Tell me your thoughts on the Florents."

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

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

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

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

"Yes. What do you think of the lady?"

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

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

There was more teeth grinding.

"Her manner. Of. Advances- Is not that too forward—"

Davos suppressed a snicker.

"My lord, that is so."

And Stannis rounded on him, his scowl terrible.

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

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

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

“Explain.”

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

Stannis was watching him intently now.

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

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

Stannis nodded; Robert told him of this.

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

Stannis blinked.

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

“He would,” Stannis growled.

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

Davos quirked a smile as Stannis blinked again.

“Bold,” Stannis allowed.

“The dance with your brother went little better, Lord Arryn says. He tried to charm her in his usual way,” Davos continued through Stannis’ renewed scowl. “But she was wise to him and very much still with her back up from Lord Brandon.

A lady unimpressed by two men as was Lord Brandon and Robert is very special. She seems well pleased with the betrothal and well pleased by you. I think that’s well enough to start with, don’t you?”

Stannis’ look was still skeptical. But Lord Arryn was not a man prone to misremembering. Davos could see that a seed of hope was settling into Stannis but the man was not going to help it along at all, too untrusting of everything. As far as Davos was concerned, a lady that was generous and patient, who found Stannis’ abruptness tolerable or even amusing, was far more than could be expected. So it was very fortunate and a very good beginning, indeed. He looked forward to more visits to the Foxhole.

King's Landing: A Courting or Siege. You decide.

Chapter Notes

"The way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

Julia Child and barbecue, don't fail me now.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The coming days, they would make way to the Foxhole. At first, it was just for tea, where they would soon meet each and every one of the Florents present, and they would sit and converse. That is, only after Selyse's brothers were done testing him, which caused Davos to laugh to himself through Stannis' teeth grinding when they leave the Foxhole afterwards.

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

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

On that last topic, Stannis had not known that he had a relevant opinion or that he could reach the levels of frustrated rage that he did and yet not wish to end the argument. Erren calmly goaded him on, merely looking vaguely curious as Stannis' grip on his chair arms became white knuckled as he insisted they were NOT the same and furthermore, one was more correct than the other-! Which meant afterwards that Stannis had the displeasure of looking up occasionally and seeing Erren looking at him with a distressingly contemplative expression, as if he was the odd one. The younger boys were of the habit of staring at him

from behind large pieces of furniture or around door corners. When he caught them at it, they would smile at him, before ducking back out of sight. Baffling.

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

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

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

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

"You plan to exploit whatever you find?"

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

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

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

Eventually, every morning Renly was escorted to the Foxhole, where he would have lessons with Maester Willis along with the Florent children and then to spend the rest of the day until dinner, playing. Stannis noticed that Renly's lingering sadness from enduring the siege and

subsequent shyness from the uncaring isolation of the Red Keep was swept away by the boisterousness of the Florent boys.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Renly gasped at the profanity.

“Imry, don’t curse,” Omer objected.

“Yeah,” Merrell added.

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

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

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

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

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

“That will do well for me.”

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

“Punch?”

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

“Robert is insisting on a grander affair.”

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

“He won’t.”

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

“He will. I will make it so.”

“He is the King.”

“Irrelevant. You’ll see.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He had no idea what to do with this information.

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

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

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

So he took to ignoring the physical appeals of women, setting out to overcome the base lusts of the body that everybody had and after enduring starvation, it was easier than ever before, for hunger was a more imperative urge than lust. Lust was nothing, nothing to thirst and hunger or the need for air.

If he had to think on it, he supposed that he expected no surprises about Lady Selyse once it was known that she was plain. What did it matter if she was or not? She was his betrothed, he would not look at others from that moment forward as a point of pride and duty.

Disappointment was useless. He only hoped that she would be sensible and tolerable to live with. This was not what happened. Perhaps Robert weighted the dice before he met her by mentioning how a specific region of her figure was notable enough to distract from her face. He had been skeptical of that, too. She put paid to that suspicion very early on the day they met, striding away from him to the globe to explain latitude and longitude to Davos. She

was... enticingly lush. Immediately he wondered wildly what it would be like, to grip her there, to pull her up against himself with both hands.

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

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

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

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

"I do not know. Probably not."

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

"It is not serious as that."

She waited. Selyse was very patient with him, Stannis found. Almost as well as Davos, who had the sailor's patience with waiting for tides, with being becalmed, to being delayed by a storm blowing you off course.

"Are you truly a maid?" Stannis finally burst forth.

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

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

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

“The way you look at me.”

“What way? This way?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Correct.”

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

“It is just- You look at me.”

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

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

Stannis had to look away, out the window.

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

“Do you want to fuck them, these other women?”

Stannis almost reared away from her, from this sudden vulgarity.

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

“You heard me.”

“No!”

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

Stannis’ scowl showed what he thought of that idea.

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes.”

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

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

“Very well.”

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

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

“I must give Lady Selyse a gift.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What might she like, my lord?”

Stannis made a distressed, inarticulate mutter.

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

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

“You could give her a book.”

Stannis nodded slowly.

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

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

“Jewelry.”

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

Stannis thought a mere bauble wouldn’t be nearly enough to express his esteem for her, but Davos had the right of it. Over the next few days, he met with court jewelers to have something made. He had never agonized over jewelry before; obviously earrings were unacceptable for a Florent. That still left necklaces, brooches, bracelets, rings! What sort of metal, what sorts of stones- maddening.

His palms started to sweat when at the earliest opportunity, he presented the box to her. There was a fraught hush between them as she picked it up and opened it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter End Notes

Guess who's discovered he's an ass man? Stannis. There is a horrid pun opportunity there, I'm sure.

Storm's End: Preparations and Speculations

Stannis was struck by a further impulse to be able to touch her. His previous dislike and hesitancy regarding dancing was overcome. He was not in practice, however, and told her so. She suggested practice sessions prior to lunch and that their lunches could be made simpler and thus shorter so that they would have ample time before he needed to return to his office in the Red Keep. He had not wanted to; the lunches were so tasty and filling. But weighed against entirely proper reasons to hold her hand...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well?" Selyse walked over, still holding Alekyne's hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stannis blinked. And then he slowly nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, well- Lord Florent-”

“So good of you to come, I had thought your social calendar was ever so full!”

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

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

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

Who did this little cunt think she is-!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cersei stormed off. Robert shrugged to himself.

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

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

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

“... Thank you, Robert. I know.”

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

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

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

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

"You'll not catch me unawares again!" Robert shouted happily. "Come on!"

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

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

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

at all! They asked about Lann the Clever, which began to make sense as he saw that these young Florents were enamored of a good trick and mischief.

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

"May we speak, Ser Jaime?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gods, Jaime could well imagine. He saw how they made a game of getting past guards by distraction or timing changing shifts, while patiently sneaking. All of them were unnervingly light on their feet and more than once he'd been startled by a child less than four feet in height staring solemnly at him from a room he had just left, sure that he was alone before (An

especially potent sign to not attempt to be with Cersei here!). In order for them to rig pranks of such frequency on Lord Tarly, they were able to circumvent door locks. He hadn't seen them get past barred doors yet, but that is not to say they wouldn't try because of the foolhardiness of children.

"Can you not merely order them to not try?"

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

"Because he is a Lannister," Jaime smirked.

Lord Florent made one of his insouciant shrugs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Florents were serious, as instead of a raven, once Jaime finished his letter, they paid for a horse-riding messenger to go to Casterly Rock directly, taking along Jaime's request and a packet of introduction letters from the Florents. The ink-filled pens they all used allowed for densely packed script on each page and it was not only Lord Florent and the younger Florent boys; Lady Selyse herself wrote a letter, Lord Alekyne wrote a letter, and young Lady Delena wrote a letter. Lord Renly contributed a letter also. Last of all, they packed a copy of the Florent tale, 'Treasure Island', as a gift.

Lord Florent's letter to Tywin must have been the right mix of respectful and reasonable, because the Old Lion himself chose to allow Tyrion on the journey to Storm's End.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah,” Merrell echoed. “Don’t you?”

“I do.”

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

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

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

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

Lady Selyse made an amused purse of her lips.

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

“You may.”

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

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

Lord Tywin focused his heavy gaze on Lord Florent, who calmly looked him in the eye.

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

Lord Tywin said nothing to that.

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

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

It was only Lord Tywin and Ser Jaime, then.

“What do the Florents want?” Lord Tywin finally asked. Needless to say, his question meant of House Lannister.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That girl. Delena. How old?”

“Seventeen. I think.”

“Betrothed?”

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

“Tell me about the Florents.”

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

“Enough.”

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

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

Cersei opened and closed her mouth.

“I don’t know.”

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

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

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

“Why-”

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

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

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

Cersei’s gaping was getting really unattractive.

“But-”

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

“I gave him a son!”

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

Cersei pouted.

“And now, they court Tyrion.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They are careful to do nothing to anger me. Which shows some sense,” Lord Tywin summed up. “Tell me. What is the prize the Florents seek?”

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

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

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

“I don’t know,” Jaime said.

Lord Tywin’s eyes narrowed.

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

Jaime refused to look away or acknowledge his mistake.

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

They both remained silent.

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

He waited.

“It doesn’t...?” Cersei ventured.

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

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

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

He clasped his hands behind his back.

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

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

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

“It is. Three times as big at least.”

All the Florents gasped and oohed.

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

“Yeah!” added Merrell.

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

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

“A little. I’m learning.”

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

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

“There’s enough time to share a story before dinner,” Alekyne announced. “What will it be?”

“Curse of the Black Pearl!” Omer cried.

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

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

“Hound of the Baskervilles!” added Imry.

“Brave Princess Merida,” Renly waved his hand.

“Crooked House!” said Erren.

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

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

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

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

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

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

pirate's life me-"

As Alekyne goes on, Tyrion becomes enthralled.

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

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

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

"Does Jaime say why they want to write to me?"

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

"Oh."

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

"Thank you, Father."

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

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

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

Very respectfully, Merrell Florent.

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

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

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

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

“Enough of that,” he muttered to himself.

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

“Treasure Island. By Selyse Florent.”

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

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

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

He was very glad that the initial awkwardness passed quickly after leaving the presence of his father. He could see that their postures ceased to be so rigid and their speech not so studiously enunciated. And now, listening the daring antics of the pirate Captain Jack Sparrow, Tyrion felt for the first time in a long time that something good and wonderful was happening to him.

Storm's End: Wedding Day, Wedding Night

Chapter Notes

Warning: Awkward sex is awkward.

So it is finally here. Practically the goal that I have been working for since I was dumped back into ten years old in this crapsack world. My wedding day to Stannis Baratheon.

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

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

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

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

“Right, then. Horrify me. Begin.”

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

“Is it not that different from farmyard animals mating? I assume a hands and knees position, right?”

The other ladies laughed despite themselves.

“No! Lie down on your back.”

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

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

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

Oh. Poor Melessa.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Unless it’s Uncle Axell,” Rhea adds.

Everybody wrinkles their nose and laughs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Robert hooted from that and Stannis was back to scowling.

Figures.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ready?” he asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank you, Your Grace."

"You make Stannis look good. I never thought I'd see him almost smiling! In public! Hah!"

"As you say, Your Grace."

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

"Thank you, Your Grace."

"We're good-kin now! Call me Robert!"

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

"Ah, he looks well! Almost a grown man, Renly!"

"He's ten, Robert."

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

"Tall for it, though!"

"He is, that."

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

"We are glad to know Renly. We all like him very much," I nodded.

“Good.”

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

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

“Well. I do solve problems.”

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

I quirked my brows and smirked.

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

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

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

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

“Lord Lannister,” I curtsied.

“Lady Selyse.”

I moved to take the empty seat beside his.

“Thank you for accepting our invitation.”

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

“It is dearly to be wished.”

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

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

“Do tell.”

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

Of all the potential topics of conversation he thought to have with me, this was not it. He fully turned his head to look at me.

“There may be. I have not received report from the coastal lords to that effect.”

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

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

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

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

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

Lord Tywin took a sip of lemonade instead of replying.

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

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

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

He made a very subtle incline of his head.

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

“Send it to me when ready.”

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

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

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

Motherfucker.

Stannis' grip on my hand suddenly became tighter.

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

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

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

"Of course," he nodded.

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

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

"Gerofff!" Stannis barked at the women crowding him.

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

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

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

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

“Stannis,” I said. “Help me, please.”

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

He stayed mute while I helped him out of his jacket and started unbuttoning his shirt. Oh, hey. Chest hair and lots of it. Hot damn, do I love brunettes. He flinched back when I pet at his chest. He was blushing brighter now, the color going down all the way down his neck.

I left him to take off his shirt, as I flipped the shift up and over my head and let it drop to the floor. I managed to improvise a little burlesque bit by crossing an arm over my breasts as I reached behind me and undid the hooks securing my short stays.

“Get your boots and stockings off,” I waved towards the waiting chair with the boot jack. “I'll wait.”

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

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

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

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

“... Logical,” he allowed.

This dear, dear man.

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

“Help me with my hairpins?”

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

so. I lie back and opened my arms to him.

“Kiss me, Stannis.”

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

“Selyse!”

“Did I scare you?”

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

“I wanted to know what it was I like. I’ve seen it done.”

“You wanted to know.”

Stannis sighed and closed his eyes.

“You always want to know,” he mutters.

“Well. Yes, my lord,” I couldn’t help the pert tone I took.

He makes another huff, this one the quietly amused kind. So we kiss again, this time with tongue. It’s good and hot, but I know it’s not nearly enough, as he starts shuffling his knees between my own.

“Lick my nipples,” I blurt out.

“What?” he looks scandalised again.

“Touch my nipples,” I use my hands to push my breasts together. “So they feel good.”

“How do you know this?”

And there’s the suspicious inflection in his voice again.

“Because I’ve rubbed a washcloth over them after I grew breasts and I felt what I felt. And then I experimented-”

He mutters ‘of course’ to himself.

“By myself and it’s good.”

I start flicking them with my fingers until they harden. He’s watching me do it, mouth slightly open.

“Come on, Stannis,” I lower my voice.

He goes adorably pie-eyed the way he always does when I pull the Marilyn Voice on him.

He wavers for a few more seconds but once he comes to his decision it's immediate; he simply drops his head and sucks one nipple into his mouth, while reaching and gripping at my other breast. He's not that gentle, but I don't need gentle, I need sensation, and I'm not faking the noises I'm making from what he's doing. He stays there for a while, until he looks sideways at the nipple he's pinching and rubbing with his hand and seems to think for a moment before switching off. He looks up at me, faintly surprised, every time he makes me gasp or giggle from the sensations. He lifts off after a few minutes, rubbing and massaging both of my breasts with this amazed expression on his face.

We kiss some more while he touches me and I think I might be ready enough when he starts shuffling his knees again. I open my legs readily and he starts humping at me, dragging against my lower belly. He shifts down and gives a jerking shove-

“Whoa, no, Stannis, wrong hole- poking at the wrong-”

He stops and makes one of his angry, frustrated bark noises before burying his face in the pillow next to mine. He's distracted by embarrassment, so I get leverage and flip him onto his back.

“What? What, Selyse, don't-”

“I tolerated some blind poking about just now. It will not do.”

I push myself up so that I can straddle his thighs. He's got that scandalised look again, but at least he's not pissy embarrassed now. I reach for him, but the embarrassment has made him soften a tad. I handle it gently and hesitantly, like I actually am a virgin, and I leaned over to kiss him. He hardens back up, which is encouraging. He doesn't expect it when I kiss my way down his throat and give his nipple a lick.

“Selyse!”

“Does it feel good?”

He blinks at me.

“I'm trying again,” I warned him, before swirling my tongue on his nipple and giving his cock a stroke at the same time.

He arches with a hiss.

“Good?”

“Ye- Yes.”

I just made Stannis stutter. Hot. I kiss him again. It's just awesome that he likes it; not every man likes that and if he's one of them, better for me.

After he's good and ready from a few minutes more of me making him quiver and twitch, he's watching me, breathing hard, eyes wide, as I rub the tip of him against me. I get the head in and hold him there. It's a squeeze and I am entirely unused to it. It's been over twenty years. So sue me.

Deep breaths. He's starting to shift his hips.

"Don't stab me with it. I can do it," I mutter out, inching my way down.

"Hurry."

I will not. I can feel resistance as he goes, but he's not coming to a hard stop. So good so far, and I bear down steadily, rocking and pushing past the resistance.

"Success," I say, looking at how we are joined. "With no crying, even."

Stannis is looking too, his color high, again slightly amazed.

"Granted, I do wax my face on the regular. Maybe I've got that much higher pain tolerance," I tap my chin as if in thought.

Stannis makes yet another of his inarticulate growling noises. This particular one means that he's annoyed and amused at the same time with my statements, and that he also doesn't appreciate me making him admit that he has a sense of humor. We maneuver so that I'm flipped onto my back again.

"Ready?" he asks.

"Kiss me again."

He does and I brace myself. He moves in the herky jerky manner of the virgin that he is and it's definitely not comfortable for me. I focus on petting his hair and his shoulders, deep breathing, and not clenching up too much when he shoves in too hard. I watch as his face gets that blank, intense look as his orgasm builds and how he turns positively ruddy just before he heaves one last time into me and I feel his cock spasming. He makes a strangled exhale and crushes me against the mattress.

He doesn't let me hold him for much longer than a few breaths before getting off and dropping on to his back beside me. I feel around underneath the pillow until I find the towel that I told Megga to leave underneath and press it in between my legs.

"Are you hurt?"

"Bearablely sore," I said, as I carefully wipe myself. "Now that the painful part is over and done with, it will only be more enjoyable hence."

"I need not impose on you too often, my lady."

I look at him fully with what I suppose is the classic 'Are you fucking kidding me, illogical human' look of Vulcans in multiple iterations of Star Trek, complete with single raised

eyebrow.

“One squirt in one evening is not enough for the odds of conceiving,” I say. “Shall I bring out my notebook and show you my charted moonblood cycles?”

“Please, no,” Stannis does a huffing not-laugh. “Not the notebook.”

“Do you concede?”

“I concede.”

“Well, then,” I check the towel. Yep, he’s managed to jostle me into bleeding a bit. I keep it tucked underneath me. “Do I have leave to gain one orgasm to equal yours, my lord?”

“What?” he lifts his head fully off the pillow to frown at me.

“You climaxed. Seems fair that I should do so also.”

He’s frowning again, this time the confused version.

“Explain.”

“Stannis, I wish to come, the same as you. It’s really quite simple.”

I looked at him for a few more seconds and his expression doesn’t change.

“Women are capable of release, also. I suspect Maester Cressen couldn’t have known, seeing as he has vows.”

He opens and closes his mouth.

“And I deduce that you know this because you experimented on yourself?” he finally says.

“I’ve got the bloody towel to show you, my lord, if you keep with that tone,” I warned him.

He holds a hand up to stop me from showing him.

“Shall I begin?” I ask.

He nods.

I lie back with my eyes closed and start by massaging my breasts and playing with my nipples. I take my time, letting my mind wander so that I’m just feeling. I concentrate on the knowledge that Stannis is watching me, that he’s never seen anything like this before, that this is his first exposure to porn. I’m corrupting Stannis Baratheon. I’m rubbing myself now, arching and bracing myself against the mattress, going on automatic.

When I come back down, I turn my head to look at him.

He guiltily lets go of his new hardon and then just as quickly tries to cover it up, awkward about being discovered. I reach out and take his hand.

“Again, Stannis. Let’s do it again, please.”

This time I move fast enough to straddle him first and we make out once again. He’s eager and his movements are easier, less urgent and hasty. He’s still amazed by the permission to touch my breasts. I rock against him and there’s enough slick to have him sighing and moaning. And here, after taking him in, the long legs I have are of definite advantage; I’ve got the leverage and he’s pinned under me and he has to let me set the pace.

It comes back to me; you may be out of practice (cue over 20 years of second virginity) but you don’t really forget. I knew how to dip it low, bring it up slow, circle it around and pop, pop that thing. Stannis has this lovely, slack-jawed, amazed expression through it all and he gradually tenses up, all of him tightening up, his hands scrabbling on the sheets until he comes a second time. Though I don’t get to finish again, it’s great to get to hold him once more while he comes. We’re both now properly exhausted from all the dancing and sex. He pulls the covers over us both and we fall asleep.

Storm's End: Morning After. Some Baratheons Learn Things.

Stannis blinks awake and stretches. He feels... more relaxed than he ever has in probably years. There is a sound from the hearth and he looks up to notice a servant studiously ignoring the couple in the bed as they finish sweeping the ashes from last night into a bucket and stoking the fire back up with a fresh log.

He puts his head back down and closes his eyes, waiting until the servant finished their task and exits.

Selyse is still asleep beside him.

He has never seen her so peaceful. Even at her most studiously serene and inscrutable at court, where she must use her trained ladies' courtesies to approach the likes of Lord Lannister, veritable tour de force of mumming, he knows that her mind was always thinking, her eyes always observing, and she must restrain herself from making the more impertinent of remarks that come to her. There is a spirit to her like the more hotblooded sand steeds of Dorne; she seemed to be constantly fighting at a bit and reins, wanting to run forward, to chase at full power her goals.

He's watched her, scribbling away in her various notebooks. He was allowed to look through some of her older ones and the mass of text from when she was young, at fourteen or so, changed completely into that Florent Code of dots and dashes, interspersed by mysterious diagrams and sketches. The other Florents jealously guarded their own notebooks, but he has seen some of theirs and it is the same; ideas turned into marching ants on a page, swarming to snatch at knowledge.

He is learning the Code himself. She has not just joined his family; he has joined hers.

He looks at her, gently pushing a tendril of hair that has fallen over her face out of the way and tucking it behind a now exposed ear. Now that he can see it, it is ungainly. But dear to him, because it is her ear and he sighs, shifting closer to her and smelling her perfume.

He had no high hopes about their wedding night.

From Maester Cressen as a youth he learned that the first time for a woman involved blood and pain, that he was to somehow tear through some piece of- of inner barrier made of her own flesh. The idea disgusted him as a boy, having already experienced cuts and abrasions from his time in the training yard; japes of swords and sheaths aside, he had no stomach for cutting a lady from within with the sword of his body. Things got worse as he grew older and the squires and knights were more free with tales of their exploits, reveling in the tears and cries and blood they caused, as if it was any honor to hurt somebody so much weaker than them in recompense for a few kisses and gropes, to sire bastards into the world. Stannis hated them all and could scarcely judge Robert better for his part in behaving so atrociously also.

Robert had pulled him aside a few nights before and they walked the parapets of Storm's End and Robert mortified him with so called advice. He had resolutely decided to discount

everything; how he ought to knead at her breasts like a baker works at dough, how he should tickle and pinch her nipples, how he ought to smack and squeeze her arse a few times because she had the sort of arse perfect for doing so, how he should stick his fingers inside of her and scoop around like one would do for capturing the last bit of honey from a jar.

It turns out, Robert was more right than not. Gallingly.

He is not too annoyed by the end, because Selyse may have been a maiden; he could see the dirtied towel, shoved off the bed from their exertions, but she was not shy and shrinking like a typical highborn lady. She had the audacity to pleasure herself in his presence and then, to mount and ride him! He would have stopped her, only the fog of satisfaction from his first release must have muddled his mind. He's glad he did not, because now he knows what he ought to be providing her and how she looked when properly pleased. He is sure that as pleasurable last night was, the marital act would be greatly improved by driving her to such heights by his own effort.

His thoughts have woken all of him up and he's annoyed anew by the fact that he's rubbing himself upon her hip like some sort of ill-mannered dog humping at legs.

"Stannis," Selyse says.

He freezes and resolutely meets her gaze.

"Stannis," her voice rolls low in the way that has always driven him mad. "Stannis."

She reaches for him so unhesitatingly and kisses him. There is that moment of surprise, even though they are married, even though she has shown in act and deed that she has desired him from the first. He grips her perhaps too tightly; it is still hardly believable to him that they are allowed this. Eventually, she takes one of his hands and guides it to a breast. He watches her, as she sighs and arches into his touch and he struggles to tamp down his lust to a manageable level. He wants to start, wants to couple with her, but this, seeing her coming undone, seeing how she responds, this isn't at all mentioned by anybody. Well. Robert did have a few words about the fun of playing with a woman first, a way to cajole your way in, but he's not like Robert! Robert can't appreciate this. This is worth it on its own. And this was just for him. He sucks a nipple into his mouth and she hisses a little and twitches away from him. Too hard? He backs off, running his tongue over it more gently and that she likes better, from her sighs.

She kicks the covers away and makes a simply delightful wiggle of her hips, turning her back towards him and gives him a free view of her nude arse.

"Touch me there," she murmurs. "I know you've been waiting."

He does, cupping and squeezing and it's just as thrilling from the taboo of it as touching her breasts. He grips and parts her and he can see some pale traces of his seed that has leaked out of her and he is aroused all over again by seeing the proof of what they have done.

"Want to do it while you look at it?" Selyse asks, looking at him from over her shoulder, eyefucking him.

It takes him a second to figure out what she means and he licks his lips, hesitant and excited by the idea.

“It isn’t proper,” he feels like he must state this out of propriety.

“What we do together as a husband and wife is no concern of anybody else,” she scoffs and moves to get on all fours. “Come on, husband. Let’s find out if this pleases you.”

Well. He’s learned by now that she’s just as stubborn as him, though more courteous about it, and she does make a perfectly logical argument about people needing to mind their own business... so... He gets up on his knees, to look at her, absently squeezing his cock. She is spectacular. There is strength in her limbs, her legs are honed and strong, with the lean, graceful muscles of a courser or sighthound. Underneath the softness of her skin is power and as he reaches out to touch her haunches again, she leans into him, welcoming. He slips his fingers in after rubbing at her folds, as Robert suggested, and carefully makes a scooping motion.

“That’s good,” she says. “Firmer, Stannis, please.”

He does so, becoming more confident when he hears no signs of pain from her, enjoying the slick softness. He gets between her knees and rubs his tip along her folds, imitating her actions from last night. He’s unsure if he would harm her again, though the second time didn’t renew her bleeding. He eases in, the pleasing tightness making his breath short. He grips her arse, parting her so that he can watch as he disappears into her, as she takes him. He’s never imagined this. In the past, he has only wondered at touching her arse. Not this, not ever this. It’s better than anything he could have thought of.

Not too fast, he admonishes himself. He wants to watch, to properly enjoy.

He withdraws until he’s nearly all the way out and it’s tantalizing how he feels and sees that she’s gripping at him. He pushes back in and he hears a gust of breath from her.

“Good?”

“Yes,” she replies.

“I’m going to smack you,” he announces before he loses nerve from the ridiculousness of the statement. “On the arse.”

“Stannis,” her voice takes on that playful low naughtiness that he loves. “Really?”

He does, a little fearful of striking her too hard, but as luck has it, she makes a breathy little cry that is not at all indicative of real hurt, makes a little flinch that squeezes him deliciously, and the sight of her buttock reddening afterwards is piquant.

He starts up a rhythm then, steady as he could make it, smacking her when the inclination takes him, and it’s good. All too soon he has to leave off, gripping her by the hips and driving into her, goaded on by her enthusiastic cries with each thrust. He finishes, putting all of his weight on her and she wobbles a bit on the mattress. He disengages with an apology,

exhaustion causing him to fall back onto the bed and she smiles and embraces him, tucking her head in at his shoulder. The sensation of her, all of her, bare and warm and sweet smelling against his skin is yet another lovely thing.

“We really must get up,” Stannis finally says, once his breathing has evened out.

“Or, we could have trays sent up. Breakfast in bed.”

“I think it’s past breakfast,” Stannis squints at the shadows caused from the window shutters.

“Then brunch.”

“Brunch?”

“Between breakfast and lunch. Brunch.”

Her fingers are toying with his foreskin. He can’t possibly become hard again? So quickly? Oh, never mind, his cock seems to have other ideas.

“Very well,” he says as she leans to kiss him.

Outside, Robert stepped into the training yard.

He wasn’t as drunk as he expected to get; the lemonade was surprisingly appealing to drink. Furthermore, after that not at all amusing bedding because of Lady Selyse’s surprisingly circumspect Florent kinfolk (he hadn’t expected so many women to brave Stannis’ scowl for a last chance at groping at him, but apparently Lady Selyse’s interest in him made him interesting to other ladies in turn. And Robert can charitably suppose that Stannis was as well built as could be expected of a proper Baratheon. Of course the braver ladies would want to get one last free feel!), he was set upon by the younger Florents and Renly and now Tyrion Lannister, wanting to hear his stories about the Rebellion. He obliged the children until they were all yawning and when they were ushered away by the Florent adults, supposed that last night was as good as any to visit Cersei in her chambers. Perhaps he could give more advice to Stannis afterwards. He would certainly need it!

He woke up late, as was usual after a good feasting, and after a meal in his chambers, went to the train. He’d been enjoying the sport lately. Wouldn’t want to look bad in front of the young lads, after all. Certainly only Ser Barristan or Ser Jaime could properly keep up with him. The rest... Robert sighed and sneered to himself. What was he thinking? Ser Boros on the Kingsguard! He must have been truly in his cups when he named him! He supposed he ought to beat the rest of that sorry lot until they were in some semblance of proper ability. To think that they should be the first protection to himself, when he was so much better than them! Well. No use crying over spilt milk.

Ser Barristan was following after him.

There was nobody in the main yard, which Robert expected, but he did hear the thwunk of an arrow hitting a target at the target range. He decided to see who it was.

Alekyne Florent was there and Robert stood politely waiting while he took aim. That shot hit the mark also.

“Good day,” Robert called out.

“Your Grace,” Alekyne bowed.

“Good shot.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“I think I shall decree that the Florents must refer to me as Robert, as you are good-kin,” Robert grinned.

“As you say, Your Grace.”

The calmness displayed by Alekyne, with his faintly raised eyebrow, was so reminiscent of Lady Selyse that Robert laughed.

“Well! Has my brother, either of them, made an appearance?”

“Renly is in morning lessons with my cousins,” Alekyne replied. “Lord Stannis is still in bed.”

“Ah? In bed? Or in bed?” Robert wagged his eyebrows at the last, hoping to jest Alekyne into some response from the innuendo regarding his lady cousin.

“Lord Stannis has successfully copulated with my cousin Selyse three times so far,” Alekyne replied, deadpan. “We will not know the final count until they decide to stop and show up in public.”

Robert opened and closed his mouth. Alekyne stood, expressionless. Serene.

“HAH!” Robert bellowed. “A good jape, a good jape!”

“I’m not laughing, Your Grace.”

“That’s what makes it funnier!”

Alekyne did not shrug, though it was a near thing.

“Wait,” Robert stopped laughing and stood, seriously looking at Alekyne. “It’s not a jape?”

“We have sources.”

“We? Who’s this we?”

“Are you ordering me to inform you, Your Grace?” Alekyne turned to fully face him.

Robert was starting to get that bewildered feeling he often got around Lady Selyse.

“By order of your King,” Robert tried on a whim.

“Imry and I have established a useful, temporary arrangement with certain lower level servants of Storm’s End, specifically those who change chamber pots and sweep hearth ashes, Your Grace.

As we have not been arrested by the Storm’s End guards or otherwise confronted by Storm’s End authorities such as yourself or Lord Stannis, it is clear that there is no protocol established to prevent the suborning of staff by outside entities. This security flaw must be rectified prior to Lord Renly assuming control over Storm’s End.

We have also discovered at least three agents of your Master of Whispers. They have been left on staff without revealing their cover, as they may be placed there under prior orders of the Crown and we would not wish to interfere with the affairs of the realm without authorization.

Will that be all, Your Grace?”

Robert stood, gaping at Alekyne after this extraordinary recitation.

“Why have you bribed the servants?” Ser Barristan spoke up, very stern.

Alekyne looked at Ser Barristan and then looked at Robert, his pale eyes much too innocent, given the conspiracy he just confessed.

“Answer him,” Robert said.

“To find out if we can.”

Gods, the cheek! The sheer nerve! Like a proverbial fox in the henhouse! Robert hysterically thought.

“Why would you need to know that?” he demanded.

“To prevent similar security vulnerabilities in regards to Brightwater Keep and the Foxhole. Obviously.”

“Why?”

“If you do not know the reason, it means that our security measures are working.”

“My lord, you are sounding very suspicious,” Ser Barristan’s tone was low and dangerous. “Give a suitable answer to your King!”

“Others might stand to profit from ideas like Rhea and Selyse’s tin jarring or sextant and navigation book. Why should any of us make it easy for others to steal from us?”

“Ah,” Robert finally nodded. “I see. I see. Still, try not to be so shifty, eh?”

Alekyne inclined his head.

“As you recommend, Your Grace.”

Robert regarded Alekyne. He was sure that he was being laughed at behind those very calm pale eyes. Hmm.

“Three times, eh? Good for Stannis! Didn’t think he would take to it! What was the third time like?”

“Specify.”

“Specify what?”

“Specify what you want to know, Your Grace.”

So now he uses a stalling tactic, Robert thought. Hah.

“What did Stannis do? And how long did it last?”

“He mounted her from behind while she was on her hands and knees. From first thrust to spending he took approximately nine minutes.”

“Huh,” Robert considered. Maybe the fellow was lying? Not a blush or glare, even though he was being rudely intrusive about the privacy of his lady cousin. “From behind? Hah! Didn’t think he’d convince her to do it like that! Nine minutes?”

“Approximately.”

“Didn’t last too long, did he?” Robert smugly declared.

Alekyne raised an eyebrow all the way up before responding. Robert had a bare moment of regret; Florents were very dangerous conversational partners, he was finding.

“Your Grace, I recommend you cease trying to gain an emotional reaction from me. Our informants observe for the purpose of monitoring my cousin’s health should she experience undue discomfort. Furthermore, you should not be putting on any airs about the subject of endurance during activities abed. That is not a trail you would wish to follow.”

“... Have you been spying on me?” Robert finally concluded. “You’ve been spying on your King!”

“And Queen,” Ser Barristan contributed with a pained expression on his face.

“We did not specify whom the servants should observe, only that couples should be watched. After all, we don’t want the servants to report to another spymaster that we are particularly interested in one person or another. That would implicate us needlessly and open us to betrayal. Best to cast a wide net and sort out the fish after.”

Both Robert and Ser Barristan look at each other in surprise. Neither of them had ever heard of such a thing, conducted in such a manner.

“I disapprove strongly of your methods,” Ser Barristan said. “But admit that it is impressive, nonetheless.”

“If you weren’t so tall and muscular, I’d say you were Varys,” Robert snorted. “Who taught you such spycraft?”

It was here that Alekyne genuinely hesitated.

“By order of your King,” Robert emphasized.

“Selyse,” Alekyne reluctantly said. “Mostly.”

“Hah!” Robert rocked back from his laugh. “I don’t know why I should expect otherwise!”

“What do you mean by mostly?” Ser Barristan asked.

“Our ideas come from group effort. Selyse poses problems to solve and all of us give ideas simultaneously. We debate and modify ideas as a group through strenuous arguing and questioning. At least two of us act as counter arguers, trying to find the flaws to the solutions. In the case of intelligence gathering it is a true group effort. None of us want our ideas or inventions stolen.”

“Huh,” Robert responded.

“Will that be all, Your Grace?”

“What would Selyse do to you, if she should find out that you were spying on her?”

Surely she would be wroth and then mayhem and destruction would ensue! Lady Selyse wasn’t a screeching harridan like Cersei; she was a far more impressive, dangerous kind of lady who kept her voice soft and low and who could promise severe trouble if Robert should step out of line. Rather like his memories of his own lady mother, come to think of it!

“Congratulate me and Imry for successfully conducting our mission. And recommend improved security protocols to be put into place to prevent such repeats of breached security. Of course.”

“She wouldn’t care that you know about her private habits?”

“She will soon live with Lord Stannis in the Red Keep, unless she can convince him to move in with us in the Foxhole. There is no privacy for anybody within the Red Keep. She knows and expects this. It is only logical.”

Robert didn’t tend to think on how Lord Varys knew everything about everybody. But it was unavoidable here because a Florent took the time to point it out. Eh, Robert shrugged to himself. He didn’t have anything noteworthy to hide. He wasn’t going to be embarrassed about visiting his wife! Even made things more exciting, thinking that somebody might be watching, in fact! Hah!

“You Florents are a strange lot,” Robert finally said.

“As you say, Your Grace.”

“I’ll be going now,” Robert declared. “Need to get some training in. Too long speaking to you and your clever ways. Could get a headache.”

“That would be unfortunate, Your Grace.”

“Hah!” Robert said one last time before leaving.

He could tell cheek when he heard it. But he was going to allow it, because this Alekyne fellow was so interesting. Very interesting. And potentially useful, besides. He wasn’t sure how, not yet. But he could see the sense in having a smart fellow like that about. You need the right tool for the job, his father once said, showing him how a skinning knife for hunting had a different shape than a regular dagger for personal protection. A blunt hammer like himself was good for some things. A sharp dagger like Alekyne was good for others. See, Stannis? He could use metaphors!

Later, he went to find the other person in charge of the plan, this Imry Florent. Robert was told that Imry had left Storm’s End already, likely ahead of his family party to either the Foxhole or Brightwater Keep. Robert thought nothing of it and soon forgot he wanted to speak to the young man at all.

Casterly Rock: Hopeful Thoughts

Storm's End emptied gradually in dribs and drabs. Tyrion returned to Casterly Rock with dozens of new books gifted to him by the Florents, most of them his most favorite new tales. He opened one, fascinated by the quality of printed text. He was holding Fantastic Mr. Fox, which was an old favorite from the collective childhoods of the young Florents and therefore the first printed after enough copies of The Westerosi Practical Navigator were produced for Royal Fleet use. Copies of the Practical Navigator were still being printed, for sale to private ship owners and captains.

Prior to this, only Maester Creylan or his own father seemed to have the facility for deep thinking. And of course, Father never said more than needed to him and Maester Creylan had duties. Jaime tried, but he was always going to prefer Cersei's company to his own, though Tyrion could not account for it. Meeting the Florents was a revelation.

He sat in on their morning lessons with Maester Willis, and found that unlike his cousins back in Casterly Rock, who were bored and fidgety, the younger Florents were focused. Each question posed resulted in a flurry of hands being raised. Merrell, just eleven, could stand up and recite his twelve times multiplication tables. Tyrion could think of none of his cousins who knew that. He himself knew about multiplication, but he surely did not memorize up to twelve.

Additionally, Maester Willis would pose some questions about historical events and a lively debate would occur about why some choice by past kings, generals, or Lord Hands was successful or not, or even what it meant to be successful. A rousing argument that involved Erren and Omer about whether or not King Aegon V's children were ungrateful little shits, given the instability of the realm caused by their refusal to marry by arrangement almost made Tyrion fear that they would come to blows. At the end of the shouting, the two sat down, calm as you please, much to his surprise. Maester Willis asked the rest who they thought made the most convincing argument and the rest of the Florents would make their opinions known. Even Delena could make her arguments clearly and was no shrinking flower when others attention were upon her.

Maester Willis would tuck his hands in his sleeves and smiled fondly at the enthusiasm of his charges and would not say one way or another if an interpretation was correct; only when an interpretation was very wrong based on known historical fact would he intervene and advise them to do more research. Speculation he could not judge, though he did say that they must guard themselves from spurious or salacious assumptions. Their argumentation was further refined by the writing of reports and Tyrion was informed that they also had to make citations. He certainly didn't know what citations even were! Tyrion thought this was very interesting and made research more meaningful.

Lord Tywin would never allow such vigorous debate about anything. There was either the right way or the wrong way, and things were right only as he would do them. No more, no less.

The breadth and depth of thinking that Tyrion found from the Florents was amazing. If it was interesting enough sitting in with the children, sitting in on the older cousins in a temporary workshop; Alekyne, Melessa, Rhea, Selyse and Imry was an adventure. They would often make bursts of inspired exclamations while dash-dotting away (he begged the young Florents to give him the code, and promised on his life and honor as a Lannister to never ever reveal it to anybody else ever, not even Jaime, and in fact to burn the code key after memorizing it) interrupting and finishing each other's sentences.

Once, he was able to watch the older Florents concentrating on a notebook of Melessa Tarly's, which listed ideas on how to better the entire process of processing cotton and wool. It made sense since the area of the Reach encompassing Florent and Tarly holdings were satisfactory for cotton growing. Tyrion found out that the Florents had already perfected a device that separated the seeds from the cotton fibers very quickly using a system of rollers with wire teeth. This was back when Selyse was sixteen!

It was a hand cranked assembly, until the great walker Selyse suggested the addition of a pulley system and gears powered by a treadmill, as a human could walk for hours with ease and not continuously move their arms with the same duration. A year after that, they connected a waterwheel to the assembly. Fifty pound bales of cotton were produced in Brightwater Keep and Horn Hill each day, the so called 'cotton gins' strenuously guarded and they were making very good money indeed, with just the raw bales being sold within the Reach or even for export.

It was the work of a moment for the Florents to build off of the cotton gin, making rotating drums with varying lengths and densities of wire teeth suitable for carding cotton or wool. They were so successful that the smallfolk spinners could not keep up, though they were producing and earning more than ever before. Melessa had been thinking about the problem for a number of years, though she was being stymied by Lord Randyll's scolding and bellyaching for spending too much time out of her days by sitting and thinking. All of the Florents had scoffed at that; after all, was not Melessa's dowry hefty precisely because of the cotton gin and carding drum? She ought to be free to just sit and ruminate if she wished!

Tyrion watched as the Florents hovered around a spinning wheel, watching as Melessa spun.

"Tension has to be maintained on the roving, but one must concentrate on pinching with your fingers and turning the wheel at the same time."

"Put in another spindle just for the rovings?"

"Still need to pinch it-"

"Clamp it-"

"Rollers?"

"Could work. Like the carding drums."

So he watched as they used a wooden dowel to quickly mock together a spindle for a roving and opened up a small chest full of wooden gears and cogwheels, axels, turning handles, and

other mysterious pieces and workings that he had previously seen the younger Florents accustomed to playing with. They spent some time arranging some gears and then they set together a frame using various clamps and lengths of cord. Additional dowels were fixed to the gears, the gears turned to see if there was enough tension. There was not, so they adjusted by finding thicker or thinner dowels from a box of dowels. Finally, a fairly ugly setup was clamped to a chair and they did a test run.

After some fits and starts, they managed so that it was possible to turn the spinning wheel and the roving was drawn with tension onto the spindle, with the dowels holding the roving steady. They had to adjust by moving the chair and the tension dowels around until the bobbin would accept the roving.

“Eh. Works.”

“Needs to be better.”

“Right. But tension on the roving, solved.”

“It’s easier, but not faster. The spindle’s going the same speed.”

“Increasing speed increases risk of breakages.”

“Must the spindle be horizontal?” Imry finally asked.

They all stopped to stare at the spindle.

“Because drop spindles are vertical, so-”

Alekyne and Selyse immediately began tipping the entire spinning wheel sideways, and there was much bumping and swearing, until the wheel could spin freely, with Rhea and Imry holding the frame of the spinning wheel steady. They readjusted the tension apparatus on the chair and spun the wheel. The roving was feeding onto the bobbin.

“One wheel. Multiple spindles arranged in a row,” Melessa breathed.

“How many do you think we can associate with one wheel?” Alekyne asked.

“With just two we would be doubling output,” Selyse mentioned.

“Triple it.”

“Quadruple it!” cried Imry.

“We. Have. Total. Thread Domination!” Selyse cried out, her fists thrust into the air with victory.

All the Florents bounced in place with their hands in the air and cheered and Tyrion joined in, swept away by the excitement. The adult Florents were all ushered into the workspace to take in the undoubtedly incomprehensible mess of gears, cord, and tipped over spinning wheel that was the latest project prototype. Once it was explained, all of them cheered and clapped

and congratulated the experimenters. It was clear to Tyrion that a spirit of inquiry was rewarded and that a freedom to explore and make mistakes in the name of progress was gladly extended to the younger Florents. He envied that very much.

The Florents busied themselves with sketching and writing out the mechanics of their prototype. Alekxne brought in the dedicated carpenter and metalsmith that he brought with him from the Foxhole as part of his household staff and they got to work; it took perhaps two days before they had six (Six! Amazing!) spindles driven by gears and cogs spinning away. It took even less time for Melessa and Selyse to modify a loom with a new part to improve weaving speed. They named it the Flying Shuttle and it took very little time at all for an experienced weaver of Storm's End to learn the rhythm for making the shuttle shoot excitingly from one end of the loom to the other, laying out the weft at speeds never seen before. In the end, another horse-riding messenger was dispatched to Brightwater Keep with both of the plans for the spinning frame and the flying shuttle, to be put into immediate construction and production at the Florent and Tarly cotton and wool mills. Selyse wanted many bolts of cloth immediately, for some reason of her own, to be prepared and shipped to the Foxhole.

Their enthusiasm is not to say that they did not value propriety outside of their workshop. He noticed that when they appeared in the dining hall amongst company such as his father, they sat straight, used their tableware very correctly, never chewed with their mouths open, not even young Merrell, and were in the habit of using their napkins mid meal to keep their chins clean. Their accents which betrayed nobility became more clear, more enunciated and they used flowery turns of phrase with comfortable alacrity. Lady Selyse was a completely different person; more remote and serene, her hands consciously clasped on her lap. They were a secretive lot when it came to their experimenting and their freewheeling ways of thought. They were selective about their openness. When they extended that same openness to him in a few short days and moreover, always included him in their conversations and experimenting, he felt quite special. They may want something from him, but that was because they valued him. Tyrion. For his mind, not his last name. He found Jaime within the first few days after properly meeting the Florents and thanked him profusely for it.

It is not just the obvious affectionate behavior of the younger Florents amongst each other. The older Florent brothers are more sedate, somewhat more conventional, but Tyrion can clearly observe that they actually like each other. Which is something of a feat, as Ser Axell Florent is so unlikeable as a person. He is prone to cutting statements, his tone of voice is unmoderated gruffness, and there is a touch of disrespect in his address that is not leavened with amusing cheekiness or any grace, tact, or charm, as demonstrated by his nephews. Yet Lord Florent and Ser Colin are fond of their brother and can be found in company together in the evenings, discussing matters of the Reach, King's Landing and court in low voices. Additionally, he was fond in turn of his nieces and nephews, though Selyse was his clear favorite. There was a softening of his expression on his homely face whenever Selyse spoke to him.

For all that Axell is difficult to converse with, he was canny enough to extract truth from obfuscation and they all value his intelligence and commitment to sleuthing. Tyrion found it interesting enough to listen to him speak on his duties and work for the Master of Coins. It seems that the most favored penalty for cheating on taxes was a punishing fine first and then

escalating to garnishing of income and then finally a total confiscation of material goods and property up to getting sent to the Wall. There were certain Crownlands Lords who claimed unruly bannermen. And it was true; tax collectors disappeared after making their way into Crackclaw Point. The older Florents didn't mind Tyrion overhearing their discussions about empowering the Master of Coin and the attached Office of Taxation with detachments of knights or other men-at-arms to protect collectors employed by the Crown proper instead of the hapless hired on tax farmers of Lords who were still grudgingly bending the knee to the Baratheon dynasty and were being slow about giving what was rightfully owed as the least of their duties to the King.

Ser Axell was sure that he was gaining enough influence with the Master of Coin and the in place bureaucracy to convince the man to come forward with such action plans during Small Council. Which meant of course, Lord Florent would make this known to Alekyne and Selyse, so that Lord Stannis would be brought in (those were lords sworn to Dragonstone directly, after all) and for all of them to put the matter to Lord Arryn. Between the Master of Coin, Lord Stannis, and Lord Jon, it would take very little at all for a plan of the Florents to be ratified into action by the King. This was all very neatly done, Tyrion thought. And with so much less rancor than watching his own Father's whipcracking orders at uncles Tygett and Gerion, while poor Kevan wrung his hands and tried to placate everybody and succeeding at neither.

Tyrion supposed that it was odd from his point of view that the Florents were so eager about collecting taxes. On the other hand, with one of their own installed within the bureaucracy and making himself indispensable, perhaps they were angling for the seat of Master of Coin. That made perfect sense. And perhaps, further seats or honors, even Hand of the King, as Lord Arryn was elderly. Which made it curious indeed that they allowed his presence. Surely they would suspect that he would report them to his father? Surely they wouldn't want a rival House to know so well their plans? On the other hand, the younger Florents had witnessed the way his own sister insulted him, and how his father had nothing to say to him. Even held him in contempt. It was left unsaid that his own father would ask of no report from him and he would volunteer no words either. Imry and Erren had asked him innocently what Lord Tywin was like as a father, as they did not have one of their own and to his shame, he flushed and his eyes teared up just thinking of all the indignities heaped upon him and they now knew it was a sore subject.

To his surprise, Imry and Erren embraced him, as easily as they embraced their sister and cousins.

"We're sorry we even mentioned-"

"Oh, no, it's nothing," Tyrion quickly wiped at his eyes. "Nothing. Father is-"

Cruel, cruel, cruel! But he must not say the words, he's a Lannister, they aren't, nobody must know. He watched as Imry and Erren stepped back and twitched their eyebrows at each other in silent communion. How he wished he was as close with any kin as they were! Even Jaime took Cersei's side over him!

"Lord Tywin is most formidable," Imry finally said, his diplomatic statement bland and true.

Tyrion nodded then, glad that they were conscientious enough to not say more than the obvious, given what they now knew.

The youngest Florents were less diplomatic. Omer placidly informed Tyrion that he was very pleased that Tyrion wasn't a stuck up prig like the rest of the ubiquitous pack of lesser Lannisters that made up the usual retinue surrounding Lord Tywin when he traveled. Merrell piped up with a single Yeah, (he was most monosyllabic and some might have thought him simple, with his tendency to stare unnervingly at you with his pale eyes and nearly mute ways around people not his kin or Maesters) and Tyrion laughed. They enjoyed sneaking past the Lannister guards to find him in his assigned chambers and sharing stolen tarts and cookies from the Storm's End kitchens.

It wasn't until reading Fantastic Mr. Fox that Tyrion understood why they would bother with childish thievery; (he was accustomed to giving orders to servants for snacks at any hour of the day, and they obeyed, having become used to Aunt Genna's own love of sweets) it kept them on their toes, it kept them sharp, it was very simply a Florent sort of thing to do. Father would definitely disapprove of such antics, of glorifying thievery! Tyrion found that Omer and Merrell were quite the troublemakers and that they were greatly aided by their sister Delena, of all people. For as Lord Randyll raged and stormed from the pranking, not a person thought to suspect her. And it was she who distracted guards with pretty words and gentle conversation, who gave warning if they neared, while the two of them wreaked havoc in Lord Randyll's rooms. Tyrion had laughed uproariously at the retellings of their exploits. He's asked Jaime about it and Jaime confirmed that the younger Florents at large really were as troublesome as that and that Lord Florent did the bare minimum to placate the irate Lord Tarly.

Lord Florent is so genial that one could be tempted to underestimate him as a lord. Yet he held dominion over his holdings no less capably as he ought. In fact, he might even be more fearsome than expected. Tyrion asked the household knights and men-at-arms of the Florent retinue and Alekyne was frank about revealing what he knew from his own lessons about managing a holding. It is known that to be caught poaching or committing banditry in Lord Randyll Tarly's lands resulted in a quick death. To be caught within Florent borders?

Those alive were absorbed into the dungeons, where they were not tortured by rack or lash, but darkness, isolation, starvation, sleep deprivation. They were needed to be coherent before rounds of intense questioning. The Florent gaolers were literate and courteous, and unrelenting with their interrogations, learning well from the Florents' love of tricky word games such as 'Two Truths and a Lie'. Lord Florent was ever sure that bandits worked in bands and it would do well to root them out, branch and stem. Bandit dens were scoured clean with extreme prejudice. From there, he would have them sent to the Wall. If they were so eager to take up arms, Lord Florent was said to wryly note, then they can do so in service to the Seven Kingdoms and where they can regret leaving the Reach forever. It wasn't as if gainful employment was not available on his lands if they properly presented themselves to Brightwater Keep, after all.

As a consequence, the Florent household knights were more skilled than one would expect with lassoing and throwing nets, of tracking and capturing men alive, and the Florent hunting hounds were excellent scent trackers. Alekyne revealed that breeding the hounds was Lord

Florent's primary hobby after reading Selyse and Maester Bryan's genetics treatises. The Florent hounds were friendly beasts, certainly much less threatening than the hunting hounds of Casterly Rock; those dogs Tyrion avoided because they were so large compared to himself and prone to staring at him as if they wanted to eat him and always snarling at that. These dogs were long-eared, droopy faced, sleepy eyed, and prodigious droolers.

Tyrion was taken out on a hunt to see how a brace of those hounds worked. He had never seen hounds the like; they ambled in a perhaps ungainly manner, and yet they were intent, their noses to the ground. They wore harnesses (curious!) and were kept on lead and the hunting party followed after the kennel master. Once they got to a game trail, they were directed to some deer hoofprints. They circled and set off, intent, pulling at the leads attached to their harnesses. Silent. It was clear that Lord Florent had no patience with baying packs of hounds that flushed quarry well ahead of the hunting party. They followed for miles, until the hounds finally did bay, causing the deer to scatter from their hiding places in the brush and the lords shot off their arrows. One doe was downed cleanly and another ran off, injured. The hounds were led to the blood and let off the leads then; they loped off, baying from the fresh trail. They were certainly not the fastest, but as Tyrion and the others followed, it was clear that the dogs were unerring. In the end, they found the wounded doe and struck it down. The dogs did not have to be beaten back from the carcass, being so obedient; they merely walked about, licking at the blood. King Robert was impressed by the tracking ability and the dedication of the hounds, though he himself preferred just the kind of hunting Lord Florent did not; the sort that called for more galloping, yelling, and a noisier pack of hounds. The other lords felt the same.

Tyrion watched Lord Florent shrug carelessly, unconcerned with the opinions of the others. He knew what he wanted with his dogs. And Tyrion knew too. They were manhunters. If you thought you could cross water and lose them, you were wrong. They would just cross to the other side and run back and forth intently until they found the trail again. If you thought to circle, to switch back, to run along the tops of walls and fences, to confuse the trail by going into muck and dung, you were wrong. His dogs could find trails three days old, Lord Florent quietly boasted. His dogs weren't bred unless they could find a mouse in a little wooden box within an acre field. He required dogs that could track unstoppably and accurately, who would surprise and tire out fugitives, so that they could be captured. Alive. Lord Randyll Tarly issued death. His own lord father issued death. Lord Alester issued life at the Wall. He preferred long term despair and regret for those who dared infringe on the peace of his lands.

The kind of lord who would seek such breed characteristics from mere dogs for such purpose was formidable indeed, Tyrion thought. More so because Lord Alester was daring everyone to mistake his smiles for the weakness akin to Tyrion's own grandfather Lord Tytos. Poor Lord Tytos didn't have the stomach for such things; Lord Alester was of different stuff. Lord Florent would be smiling that warm, friendly smile, while consigning people to ruin. He didn't demand fear. Lord Alester would much prefer the finer things in life; good food and drink, conversations in front of a warm hearth, cosseting his dogs, making his wife blush with a look. Yet Tyrion supposed if anybody thought him a soft Reacher lord would have all their lives to regret their foolhardiness in testing the craftiness and decisiveness of the Florents at the Wall. There was something unsettling about somebody who didn't seek, yet gained something so effortlessly.

He looked forward to beginning a correspondence with all the Florents. He resolved to look at the library of Casterly Rock with new eyes, and to have it recategorized according to the Florent Decimal System. The Florents were so generous and eager to receive letters from him that they gifted him with a shiny new red ink-filled pen. There was a gold lion head embossed at the top half. To make sure that his father could not possibly feel slighted, they gifted a red pen to him also, but with a larger embossed gold lion rampant.

Tyrion decided that after sorting out the Casterly Rock library he ought to start a project of his own. He wasn't sure if he would invent something or discover the truth behind some natural phenomena. Lady Selyse said that what was most important when it comes to innovation was a curious mind and dissatisfaction with the realities of daily life. He should just write down all his questions and musings, no matter what and regularly reread his notebook. He was going to start a notebook of his own. Lady Selyse also said that he was sure to look well in a smart new jacket with suitable pockets to hold his notebook and pen. Yet another project; having a new jacket made to his specifications.

For the first time in his life he would be busy. He had goals; he just didn't know what they were yet. He was very thankful. Soon he will be so busy, he would certainly not have time to think on Ty-. Her. And he'll not have time to indulge in his impulses to drink or use whores. Why, his father might even approve! Well. Perhaps not. His luck wasn't that great. He couldn't expect anything so good from his own father. Best think on the possibilities for discoveries!

Dragonstone: Possibilities

Stannis could not quite account for how Selyse was champing at the bit to visit Dragonstone. He personally thought that the island was unlovely and grim, and with a foul stench that was only barely less noxious than King's Landing. Perhaps because the permanent miasma wasn't from human and animal dung, but rising inexplicably from the the hot vents that dotted the island. He thinks it stinks like rot. Rotting eggs, that's it. There is something intrinsically foul about the place and he cannot fathom why the ancient, pioneer Targaryens (who could have made landfall anywhere, truly) came to the place and thought: here is where we will live. Here, above all other places, we desire to first claim as home in Westeros. Perhaps the madness of Targaryens was first hinted at by their ridiculous choice. The Baratheon household made their way on the Fury, retrofitted during the yearlong duration of their betrothal.

Shipbuilding improvements involved Davos and other captains that he trusted to form a committee of advisors, and yet more scholars from Old Town to coordinate with Lady Rhea Royce, moving to fill her own workshop in Runestone. Maester Bryan busily recruited for Brightwater Keep's and the Foxhole's workshops, seeking out those persons who could not successfully absorb the breadth of knowledge required to forge a complete chain, yet who demonstrated the aptitude to earn multiple links for Mathematics and Engineering.

The brass alloy tested by Maester Willis at the direction of Selyse proved workable and the Fury's hull was sheathed in it. Also as Selyse hypothesized, it was possible to construct taller masts than could be found naturally with a single tree trunk. They made interlocking staves and bound them with iron rings similar to barrel making, and strengthened the shaft of the mast further by tightly wrapping coils of rope over the whole. This increased strength was crucial to allowing for a greater number of square sails on each mast.

After making models and prototypes and testing out a better jib sail layout on a new bowsprit, as well as triangular sail alternative to the traditional lateen sail, which Selyse inexplicably called a Bermuda sail, to serve as the fore-and-aft sail on the mizzenmast, the Fury was now faster and more maneuverable. The gains from the sails allowed for fewer oars required, which meant fewer dedicated rowers. Selyse was conservative and recommended using one-third fewer in number to test. If they could reduce it to one-half the number and maintain battle readiness, it would be quite the win. The Fury could then better serve as a troop transport, with more archers or hand-to-hand combatants suited for boarding or landing maneuvers.

After the Fury, all the other ships of the Royal Fleet were being retrofitted and a shipyard was developing at the mouth of the Wendwater river. House Wendwater was happy to gain a new source of income in the form of leasing the land for Royal Fleet use and the booming new town forming to benefit and house the workers.

Selyse informed Stannis that with the help of Lord Arryn, Robert enthusiastically grasped the merit of spending his time improving the martial capabilities of the Gold Cloaks and the training up of men for the establishment of the Royal Marines. He was also tasked with

holding twice a moon training sessions with King's Landing levies; in exchange for a hearty meal, able bodied men were taught the basics of combat and crossbow usage. The very keen-eyed were trained on the handling of bows. Once every sevenday, it was unofficially known in King's Landing to be a day dedicated to the Warrior, where men and boys would have permission to practice at the training yards of the Marines and Gold Cloaks, supplemented by a bowl of hearty stew and bread and watered ale afterwards. Women were encouraged to earn their bowls of stew, bread, and watered ale by attending classes taught by septas and healers on how to bind wounds and care for the sick, to make poultices and brew healing draughts, to sit and hear from midwives on advanced care during pregnancy and the care of infants and the importance of brushing teeth and washing hands and taking baths if possible. Robert was never going to have the endurance and patience to sit through petitions; he was a doer, not much of a thinker. Selyse convinced Lord Arryn to encourage Robert with his strengths instead of bemoaning his weaknesses. His strength was his martial abilities and his charisma; when he rode up and down the streets of King's Landing, waving and laughing and tossing coppers while criers announced that the King Needs You to Join the Royal Marines! or the King Needs Honest Strong Men for the Gold Cloaks! men clamoured and joined up enough for there to be a waiting list.

There was plenty of room within the Gold Cloaks for recruits after the ever efficient Ser Axell Florent and his cadre of auditors were set on the internal workings of the Gold Cloaks. Janos Slynt was found to be corrupt early and consigned to the Wall. Robert was aghast at the hastiness, until Selyse convinced him that perhaps they ought to follow the example of the Brothers of the Night's Watch and have the men themselves vote on leadership from a selection of experienced men who should at least be capable of lasting longer than a few minutes against himself, Ser Barristan, and Ser Jaime in single combat. Robert liked the sound of that immensely. He set about with a harsh schedule of tournament style eliminations until he found the top five veterans of the Gold Cloaks suitable. It also helped to wash out the individuals who only joined the Gold Cloaks for the regular salary while having no proper ability to fight. Axell Florent had already flushed out those with ruinous habits of gambling, drink, or whoring, who were most prone towards accepting bribes. They were sent on to the Wall. The people of King's Landing praised the good king, who was clearing their city of corruption.

Lord Arryn, armed with notebooks made by Lord Alester, Alekyne, Selyse, and Imry, ordered the new Commander of the City Watch to revamp the policing skills of the Gold Cloaks. They would demonstrate proper crime prevention and investigation instead of simply chasing down thieves. They were to have regular beat routes, to familiarize themselves with the denizens of their beats, to be able to interview witnesses without rudeness, to be firm yet polite, and to be knowledgeable about the most common crimes enough to enforce the King's peace. They would strive to live up to new ethical principles of serving and protecting the public in King's Landing by swearing new oaths upon successfully completing training. Individuals who wished for advancement were being taught how to read and write at a proper Watch Academy and to familiarize themselves with more esoteric laws and deductive, forensic detective work, such as the importance of leaving crime scenes untampered with, the idea that fingerprints could prove an individual's identity, and to actually start recording and organizing dossiers into a database on known underworld personages as well as the value of cultivating a network of informants ranging from indigent beggars who could be bought for the price of a loaf of bread, to street urchins, to observant little old ladies who sat looking out

of windows. And to improve their effectiveness when chasing down criminals, the Gold Cloaks came to own some of Lord Florent's specially trained hounds. The most persistent of street toughs should be given over to wandering Brothers of the Night's Watch when at least three warnings to seek paying work were ignored.

And there definitely was work; the Florents have leveraged their own funds, Baratheon funds, and a generous amount from the Crown treasury in the development of a plot of land along the Blackwater Rush to build a waterwheel-powered steel mill and a facility to make charcoal for the steel mill using huge cast iron retorts, forming the Royal Steelworks. The heat for creating the charcoal would be fueled by methane provided by a series of biogas digesters on another plot of land, safely further away. The finest blacksmith from the Street of Steel, one Tobho Mott, has been hired to oversee production and refining of the best steel ever seen in Westeros. There were the Royal Marines to be outfitted, along with better equipment for the Gold Cloaks, and even work begun for the Brothers of the Night's Watch.

There was a sudden new need for workers and carters to collect the waste, from dung to vegetable refuse, of King's Landing by the barrel-full and wagon load to feed the biogas digesters, workers to monitor the biogas digesters and fill and transport the gas tanks and teams of coppicers with license to enter the King's Wood to harvest wood to feed the charcoal production, and carters hired by rival fullers, dyers, and tanners wanting to copy the Florent idea of collecting barrels of urine from King's Landing and replacing full barrels with empty ones. Criers were sent out for an entire moon, encouraging people to use the barrels. Furthermore, the Gold Cloaks were told to collect a copper fine should they catch anybody peeing against walls if there were available barrels within a five minute walk away. Which of course meant a boom in business for coopers. Innkeepers and pubkeepers were too happy to be paid to set up barrels with funnels inside their establishments for the use of men, as well as curtained off areas for the privacy of women customers. The barrels for women were built more squat so that they may sit on them. Some tradespeople set up their barrels at street corners or alongside market streets, with wooden partitions for the privacy of both sexes. Soon, after a series of altercations after some tradespeople tried to unscrupulously collect barrels owned by the Florents, the barrels became painted with identifying marks according to their owners. Florent barrels came stamped with a paw print pattern.

The Dragonpit was opened and workers were busily retrofitting it to serve as barracks and training ground for the Royal Marines and Gold Cloaks. Robert was having the time of his life, bellowing encouragement as both Marine and Gold Cloak recruits struggled to shimmy up ropes to ring the bell waiting for them at the top as well as other Florent-designed obstacle courses, as they jogged in armor while chanting, as they learned to properly form shield walls and march in unison, as they took swan dives into the Blackwater after learning how to swim, to properly prepare them for conflicts at sea. He was sparring every day and matching the men in numbers of push-ups, chin ups, sit ups, and burpees. So. Many. Burpees. Stannis thinks that Robert likes the exercise because of the ridiculous name; Selyse referred to it as such and Robert inaugurated the first set he ever completed with a robust belch. The name stuck.

A standing Royal Army was an increase in the Crown's power too far for the Lords Paramount to agree with, but an elite group of fighting foot who could be quickly deployed with the Royal Fleet was unobjectionable. It simply made sense that the sailors and rowers

should stay with the ships for blockading and the Royal Marines would be capable of making landings as well as a defense against pirates. It would also serve to bring the Baratheon brothers to better accord with a common goal, not that Selyse mentioned that. Selyse was patient. In a few more years, there will be experienced Gold Cloaks and Royal Marines enough to peel away to form a proper Royal Guard (not Army). They could wait until the dynasty was more secure, with more trust from the various Lords Paramount.

As the orders were issued so that the sails were furled and the Fury slowed and the orders were given for the oarsmen to begin docking maneuvers, a gust of wind off Dragonstone hit them.

Selyse took a deep breath of the stench.

“You know what that smell is, Stannis?”

“... Intolerable?”

Selyse made a low, satisfied chuckle.

“Power. The stench of sulfur is power. This island will have mines more valuable than Casterly Rock’s.”

Stannis’s frown was the skeptical version.

“You will see,” Selyse’s chin lifted confidently. “Rock and dragonglass is all Dragonstone yields, you told me. We must discover what sort of rocks. A rock is not just a rock. Especially the rocks born of volcano and sea.”

Stannis glanced at Maester Cressen, who gave an enthusiastic nod. He would be leading the experiments and prospecting program. He would not be personally scrambling up hillsides and wielding the pickaxe; that would be the toil of the dozen scholars hired on from Old Town, ones with multiple links for Metallurgy and Engineering. Maester Cressen personally told him one evening that he was most eager to see the results of reducing material inside crucibles with high temperature flames that came not from wood, but fueled by gas. And alarmingly, when Stannis inquired as to what “gas” was, Maester Cressen stated ‘Oh, just flammable air.’ in an offhand manner. He was not reassured when he went to Selyse who, in her very deadpan manner, claimed he would be familiar with gas in the form of farts. He didn’t grind his teeth, but it was close. The humor of his wife was just too baffling some days.

“Wave, Stannis,” she murmured, as the gangplank was lowered. “Give the folks who stood for hours waiting for us a payoff.”

Stannis grimaced but did so to a roar of cheering from the crowd. Selyse raised her hand and waved in a most odd manner; her elbow almost level with her shoulder, her hand slightly cupped, her wrist nearly stiff, with her forearm swaying from side to side.

“I forgot to teach you this,” she murmured as they walked down, with her still waving. “I shall do so before we must appear in public next time. The royal parade wave. Keeps your

hand and arm from cramping up awfully.”

“Why?”

The very idea of having to endure a parade was almost enough to get his teeth grinding again.

“Applause, my Stanny Blue Eyes. We must make them love us. With love, we win and keep Dragonstone’s people.”

She kissed him on the cheek before he could protest the ridiculous pet name she had spontaneously sprung on him and the idea that the love of the peasantry mattered so much. He was their liege, they owed him their allegiance. It was their duty. Yet the crowd cheered anew with this show of affection. When they stepped down to the pier, their honor guard ushered the crowds back and Stannis was set to begin the ascent directly to the castle, but Selyse’s viselike grip on his arm halted him.

He grumbled, but stood as Selyse turned to address the crowd. She gave her wide, white-toothed grin and she cooed as a small girl broke the lines to give her a posy of mountain flowers.

“Oh, how lovely! Thank you, dear, thank you!”

She stood back up, holding the posy and her strong voice carried.

“People of Dragonstone, thank you for making me feel most welcome!”

The crowd cheered again.

“You all must be famished, waiting out here for so long for our arrival! Since we are here, let us have a meal, together! Break bread with us, people of Dragonstone! Let us have some rest and repast!”

“Selyse!” Stannis grimaced, his dread of feasts rising up. Feasts were wasteful. Feasts tortured him.

“It’s been arranged, Stannis. Trust me.”

Her expression was firm and yet, understanding. Stannis took a breath. He was not married to a frivolous woman.

They made their way to the central square of Dragonstone Village, where the staff from the castle were able to quickly set up long boards on top of barrels and crates to form benches for seating. Tin jars of jams, sauerkraut, pickled vegetables and cold cuts were also readied and loaves of bread were ready to be sliced, all from the castle kitchens. Watered ale was also available for drinking. The people found seats easily enough and the castle staff moved through with trays of bread and a choice of spreads. There were happy expressions from the first bite. It was too simple to be called a proper feast, and Davos thought that perhaps Lady Selyse preferred it that way.

Davos was sitting with two bread slices in his hands; one topped with sauerkraut and sliced sausage and one topped with jam, taking a bite from one or the other, watching as Selyse led Stannis through the crowd. She was holding her sauerkraut, pickles, and sliced meat between two slices of bread in her left hand and waving or offering her hand in greeting to any smallfolk who approached. Stannis was clearly uncomfortable with the informality, and occupied himself by eating his own bread bundled meal. Between demure bites of her bread bundle, (Davos thought here was a convenient and new thing. Sure to be widely adopted; a new fashion on eating) she smiled and chatted, holding an informal court and hearing petitions.

After an hour passed and most everybody had their fill, Lady Selyse announced that the Lord of Dragonstone had largesse to bestow. Women would receive gifts from herself and her handmaidens. Stannis (but Davos and his trusted men, really) would be distributing gifts to the men. The crowd became curious and eager. Davos was not sure himself what he would be handing out.

Lady Selyse's generosity made quite the impression. The women gasped as they opened the first few canvas sacks. Inside were seven yards of cotton and seven yards of wool, spools of thread, and steel sewing needles and sewing scissors. Davos knew that as rare as sheep were on the entire island, getting fabric from the mainland made the costs very dear, to say nothing of getting metal needles such that they made do with fish bone needles. The men also received yardage of cotton and wool cloth, but also, spools of cotton cording, suitable for making into new fishing nets, and shiny new steel knives, with blades suitable for scaling and filleting. There were many murmurs of approval and cries of 'Bless you, Lord and Lady of Dragonstone!'

Lady Selyse smiled and nodded and occasionally waved with each approbation. Every so often, she had to nudge Stannis into following suit, which caused more appreciative cries from the villagers.

It was not until they finally took their leave and the household began making their way up the stone steps leading into the castle proper that Stannis finally spoke up.

"You are perhaps too generous, my lady."

"Not when cotton and wool stuffs from the Florent mills allow me to acquire the bounty at much less than merchant markup, my lord. It is difficult enough for the smallfolk to scratch out a living on this rock. They will make practical use of our gifts."

"... From your mills? I thought your family mills only clean and prepare wool and cotton for spinning."

"The mills did only do so. And now, we spin and weave. Rest assured, Florent wealth will grow greater as we take over the cloth trade. Prices of wool and cotton goods will drop from greater supply from our mills, and a number of spinners and weavers will be out of work, but our tin jarring factory needs workers and now that we have permission from the King to set up urine collection in King's Landing, we will have barrels and barrels of the stuff for both wool fulling and dyeing mordant and helping to reduce the stink of King's Landing! Win win!"

The next few days, Selyse and Erren marched inexorably through Dragonstone castle taking their own particular inventory. Selyse planned to embark on a renovation of the castle itself to make it more suitable for habitation. Erren had notes from Selyse, Alekyne, and Imry about how to make Dragonstone more secure against incursions from spies. Maester Cressen had already set his team of scholars to reorganize and catalog the Dragonstone library. Selyse ordered him to particularly search for any records having to do with the Night's Watch and Northern lore. And possibly dragonlore. But the Night's Watch and Northern lore was higher priority.

"Cranberries?" Selyse was surveying Aegon's Garden.

"Yes, m'lady," said the head gardener. "Been grown here since before Aegon's Conquest."

"What's preventing this crop being grown on the rest of the island? They seem to be thriving."

"The Dragon Lords wanted this for their own personal use, m'lady."

"Well, that stops now. Let it be known that you will gather and distribute seeds for those who wish to try growing them. If we should have some fruit in addition to fish without needing to import, how fortunate we will be! Should we have a bumper crop, we will turn them into jam for tin jarring. The farmers will be fairly compensated for their crop. Make it so."

The head gardener smiled at this and bowed as they left the garden.

Stannis was present to witness Selyse coo and murmur over the tremendous veins of dragonglass in the lower levels within Dragonstone as if she was surrounded by rubies or emeralds.

"Tons and tons of it! Spectacular," she cried.

Erren shrugged when Stannis looked at him in question. Nobody knew why Selyse was so obsessed with dragonglass. Later Erren's curiosity would be further piqued when Selyse told him to seek out any Dragonstone folk who still knew the old ways of working dragonglass into blades and arrowheads. Erren went out into the fishing village and found one elderly fisherman still skilled in the art. He presented a knife that he made years ago, still sharp despite repeated use for gutting fish.

"Some hard years, when we couldn't afford steel or if a knife gets lost overboard into the sea, we made do with making dragonglass knives," said the obvious dragonseed with proper platinum blond hair, who answered to Saelor. "You want more, m'lady?"

"Much more. I wish for both knives, spearheads, and arrowheads to be produced and for you to begin teaching whoever wishes to learn the art. I will pay one Star by the quiverful of arrows and by the pound of knives and spearheads. Let people know. And before you start, do let any interested apprentices know that we will be providing eye protection-"

Erren stepped forward with a box filled with glass lensed goggles.

“So that they will not be blinded by flying shards. I want proper edges on those knives and arrowheads. Will you do it, Saelor?” Selyse asked.

Saelor picked up a pair of goggles, touched by the care that Lady Selyse demonstrated for smallfolk laborers. And a Star was good pay for a day’s work. And here, he could earn his suppers not by rowing his stiff limbs out into the open sea in the early morning chills, but by the hearth of his son. How could he not take this chance?

“Aye, m’lady. You’ll have all the arrows and knives you need.”

Selyse told him that there would be raw dragonglass in barrels made available outside the castle gate. Finished works should be brought to the same castle gate for payment.

“Why are you paying for knives and arrowheads made out of dragonglass?” Erren finally asked as they left.

“There will be a need for them, Erren. Not today. Not next year. Years from now. And I want them to equip the armies that will use them.”

Erren scratched his nose, thinking.

“Is something going to happen to the iron in the world?”

Selyse smiled at his quick thinking.

“Not that I know of. I do wish to be prepared with blades that are not of steel when there is a need. You will see the sense of it in the coming years. Trust me.”

Erren nodded, still curious, but satisfied.

Erren was left in charge of the workers building out the biogas digesters within Dragonstone castle grounds and located a safe distance from the fishing village. Maester Bryan and Selyse first succeeded in making a fully working system after an initial prototype that trapped gas within a pig bladder when she was sixteen back at Brightwater Keep.

It was disgusting in a fascinating way to Erren when he first learned about the set up, how poop was rendered by earthworms inside an enclosed space into compost and it formed gas that was collected into a small cylindrical steel tank that Selyse warned most strenuously to not be tampered with without supervision. When the tank was full (judging by weight), it would be wheeled into the most dangerous workshop, one that was a good distance away from Brightwater Keep itself in a separate stone building, and connected to a device that Selyse dubbed the Bryans Burner, after Maester Bryan.

A valve was turned, a moment of hissing noise, and with a few sparks from a striker, there was flame! With a few adjustments, the bright red flame was turned into a hotter blue flame and Maester Bryan was breathless with giddy joy that was quite out of character for a man of his age. That resulted in so many experiments, with crucibles set on tripods over the flame, as myriad substances were tossed in and melted down to observe the results.

Selyse warned everybody very strenuously that should the entire tank of gas take to flame, it would cause a mighty explosion, perhaps like wildfire. Of course they took precautions, as they were not stupid. Eventually, they were so used to the Bryans Burner that Delena dared to make toast by holding a slice of bread over it on a metal skewer. Selyse did find that amusing and Alekyne convinced her to allow the smithing of a perforated copper pipe set within a steel box on legs and a grill positioned over it, suitable for attaching to the gas tank.

“And now we’re cooking with gas!” Selyse whimsically exclaimed that day.

Erren remembered the fascination he had as the entire family crowded around the gas grill, watching as slabs of steak and links of sausage cooked and slices of bread toasted. The head cook was quite amazed at the speed of one of her iron skillets heating up and they had grilled fish ready in a trice. They had a very exciting meal, not because of exotic spices or meat, but because of the method of cooking. The grill was moved to be closer to the kitchen with a new tank made for it and after the head cook and all her assistants were trained and used to the idea of cooking with gas, their smaller family meals were cooked in this manner. Of course, the big kitchen hearths were still used for roasting whole pigs, and the like during feasts, but everybody liked the ease of the gas grill. Erren thought it a sorry thing that they could not risk such a setup in the Foxhole, being in the middle of King’s Landing. But, who knows? Perhaps the Florents could benefit monetarily from it; it was just a matter of time.

Erren could work out very easily why Selyse wanted biogas digesters set up; there were a few pitiful trees remaining on the island except the pines of Aegon’s Garden and the Dragonstone smallfolk spent dearly for firewood shipped in from the mainland. With the village all contributing their daily waste into the digester, they would be able to cook without such costs and the farmers would be able to fertilize their fields as well as with the compost! The question would be how quickly the smallfolk would adopt cooking with gas. After all, it is dangerous if the gas were to be ignited by a stray spark.

Selyse wanted Erren to stay for a time on Dragonstone, after she and Stannis must leave to return to his duties as Master of Ships in King’s Landing, to teach the smallfolk the benefits of cooking with gas and to all contribute their daily waste into the digester. It made sense to him. He would also get to observe Maester Cressen’s experiments with all the different rocks that his scholars would be bringing in from around the island. That more than made up for the probably tedious task of trying to communicate with ignorant smallfolk.

Erren supposed he would miss the Foxhole; he was too excited about exploring Dragonstone for homesickness to set in yet. He expected he would feel sad about it soon enough; he missed Brightwater Keep terribly the first moons after moving to the Foxhole. And his mother! Why, he didn’t know when the next they will meet. But here, he would be a project lead, ahead of Imry! What an opportunity, not to mention the different merchants and peoples he will meet who anchor at Dragonstone to have their cargo checked prior to making way to King’s Landing. Additionally, a training ground and barracks for the Royal Marines were being built and they would provide ample opportunity to keep his fighting skills sharp. He certainly will not be bored, not at all!

It is also here, in isolated Dragonstone, that a truly top secret Florent project was to be undertaken. Essentially, they would be using their knowledge of chemistry to develop a

substance with the explosive power of wildfire, but controllable. Obviously such power would destabilize the Seven Kingdoms if it were released widely. There were many hours of debate within the Foxhole on the matter. Selyse had not breathed a word of this until their departure for Storm's End for her wedding. Beyond the philosophical questions about the morality of creating something that seemed only useful for destruction, Selyse stated that they perhaps would not necessarily need the substance, but if there was a great enough risk to the realm, then she would do what was necessary to protect life. Erren was just old enough to know the secret, along with Delena.

This was a heavy responsibility. Erren did not know what Selyse was so afraid of, what made her so paranoid (but not mad! Surely she wasn't mad!) but he trusted and loved his sister so he set out to succeed.

King's Landing: And Now For Something Completely Different

Chapter Notes

Warning: Robert Baratheon is a demented sex pig, wallowing happily in a mud of depravity. He was a great scoffer about Duty, but seeing as Stannis is manfully going about said Marital Duties with a will, and Baratheons Have Issues, it is now a time of great tribulation for Cersei. *Dubious Consent*

Megga of Brightwater Keep is embroidering a handkerchief. She thinks that it is a funny, lucky thing that it would suit either the Lord or Lady of Dragonstone to receive the monogrammed SB handkerchief. Lady Selyse has always had indifferent skills when it came to embroidery. Not that it mattered with her cleverness, her creativity at dressmaking sewing, and her skills in music and dance. Megga knows from years of trailing after Lady Selyse that she simply doesn't have the time or mind to do any sort of embroidery.

It would not do, however, for the court to see her or Lord Stannis with plain handkerchiefs. The tiniest aspect of a noble's appearance sends a message to the critical eyes of the court and as often as Selyse scoffs at these shallow signs of rank, she understands the need to maintain appearances. So Megga embroiders the two letters, SB, in a fine calligraphic style. It is light work and it pleases her. She will have a stack ready for their use by the end of the day.

She thinks as she works and wonders what her dead mother would say about her rising to the position of handmaid to a princess! Well. Perhaps not exactly; Lady Selyse is royal by marriage and nobody calls Lord Stannis prince, but surely he is one because he's brother to the King. Megga doesn't know about such things; the rules of nobility are different here in the Crownlands than in the Reach. The old Gardener Kings had Princes and Princesses of the Blood for members of the royal family. She cannot recall if the Targaryens had such titles. And perhaps King Robert has done away with such. Who can say? She is not so important that she is informed on such matters. She keeps her opinions to herself.

She ties off a knot and snips the end of her thread.

Megga does not like the Red Keep. For as grand as it is, it is so big that she must travel down servants' passages for a very long time to go where she needs and they are full of tight twisting stairs because of how tall the Red Keep is. The halls and walls are full of spies.

Lady Selyse warned all of the Florent staff that the Lannisters and all courtiers have their own informants, to say nothing of the creatures that work for the Master of Whispers. It disgusted Megga, the idea of poor orphans with their tongues cut out, forced to sneak around stealing secrets for the eunuch. They only speak freely to each other in the Foxhole. Otherwise they say only the most mundane of things; requesting hearth fires and meals and to have tea and snacks brought up.

She is sitting outside of Lord Stannis' office, in a little alcove built for a waiting servant; out of sight but not out of earshot should a call be made. Soon it will be lunch and Lady Selyse has always been generous enough to allow her to eat with her when she makes these visits to the Red Keep. The thought of going down all those flights of servants' stairs just to eat leftovers from last evening in the kitchens is not at all appetizing, no matter how richly King Robert likes his table set.

She looks up just in time to observe a new castle guard moving into his place across the hall. She returns her concentration to a new handkerchief in her frame, beginning to trace out the letters with her wax pencil, when she hears Lord Stannis' distinct, deep, barking cry coming from behind the office door.

To her astonishment, this particular guard springs into action and she barely manages to tug him away from trying the door latch.

"Get off, woman!" and Megga is roughly shoved to the floor.

"You mustn't disturb the Lord and Lady!" she hisses. Oh, she's bruised, she knows it, the rude beast!

The guard reaches for the latch again, when Lord Stannis cries out once more and it's mortifyingly clear:

"YES- FUCK-! Fuck, Selyse- Yes, like that-"

The guard's face colors and it serves him right. Megga gathers herself off the floor and with as much cold hauteur as she has ever seen from Lady Selyse, brushes past him to sit back in her alcove. The guard (was he new? She can't tell a thing with their helmets on) hastily returns to his spot.

Well, the last laugh is hers, because she knows Lord and Lady Baratheon by now. And she is proven right because not fifteen minutes later, Lord Stannis is crying out again. Megga has no idea what Lady Selyse is doing to him. Only when at the Red Keep, does she do this to Lord Stannis. Lord Stannis, whose grim face and scowl has always frightened Megga a little, becomes a howling, pleading thing, who curses and groans with desperate, uninhibited pleasure. Megga glances up when Lord Stannis sings out a third time after another interval of silence and nearly laughs at the disbelieving widening of the guard's eyes. She quickly looks down. Best not let that man catch her eye; she's heard rumors enough about the dangers of servants in the larger keeps and castles being accosted by lusty men and here there is only her and him in the hallway.

They listen to Lord Stannis alone one more time before they hear Lady Selyse herself, their voices joining together in an unrestrained frenzy. It is here that Megga bites her lip at the horror in the guard's expression. Lady Selyse has such strong lungs and her voice was trained for carrying power since she was a child after all. This is how she has deduced that Lady Selyse does something to Lord Stannis, something that does not involve her privy parts at all, because when they do couple the normal way, neither of them are particularly quiet. Megga wonders what it is and perhaps will work up the nerve to ask some day. Perhaps if she should ever get married. It seems a powerful thing, to make even a man as grim as Lord Stannis beg.

It sounds like Lord Stannis spends and then it is only Lady Selyse now, crying out her pleasure. Megga is sure that he uses his fingers on Lady Selyse; Lady Selyse has privately praised his generosity in bed. Megga sighs. Lady Selyse is lucky to have such an attentive husband.

Lady Selyse lets out one last robust cry and it is silent.

Megga puts her embroidery frame away in her sewing basket and stands. She calmly waits, staring at the now cowed guard. The couple will be quick about making themselves presentable; Lady Selyse places just enough and no more buttons and hooks into her dresses than absolutely necessary.

“Perhaps you should ask the guard you relieve who was last seen entering the room,” she softly suggests. “To prevent any future embarrassments.”

The guard hastily nods and the door of Lord Stannis’ office swings open. Lord and Lady Baratheon step through the door and Megga critically surveys Lady Selyse’s hair. It is fortunate that she favors a style where being tousled is no great flaw, for it is mussed. Other than that, the both of them give no sign of what they were just doing. Well. Selyse’s cheeks have a bloom and the crinkles that are usually between Lord Stannis’ brows are absent.

They both stride down the hall, heading for lunch with Lord Arryn and Megga falls into step behind them.

She doesn’t know why Lady Selyse (and surely it is Lady Selyse’s idea only. Lord Stannis seems to be a very private sort normally and not at all prone to boasting) wants it known that they engage in so much sex during the day hours in the Red Keep. The obviousness of it doesn’t seem like Lady Selyse’s style of hustle. But it is clear that if some of the lords and ladies do not know, it is because they do not gossip and that is impossible in the Red Keep, as everybody gossips. Certainly by the end of that guard’s shift more servants will know.

Queen Cersei is holding lunch alone in her apartments. It gives her no satisfaction to hear nothing new of court gossip from the likes of the Stokeworths. She broods over her father’s chastising and over the fact that Jaime is not here with her. Ever since Lord Arryn and Lord Stannis have convinced Robert that as he is best at war and therefore his best duty as king is to train the fighting strength of the Royal Marines and Gold Cloaks and King’s Landing levies, he has been down in the training yards of the Red Keep or the Dragonpit. He has taken Ser Barristan and Jaime with him every day, because he needs the best of the best to help him train the recruits. The other Kingsguard are scheduled to guard him and her by rotation. This means that though he is away from her during the day, she has no happiness because Jaime is also away from her.

She complained to Jaime about it; surely he would understand! And the infuriating fool actually liked that the oaf king kept them apart! He liked that the king was taking his duties seriously and that he relied upon Jaime! Baffling! Well. Of course he would be needed because Jaime is the best in the whole of Westeros, but surely you didn’t need the best for mere levies!

It does not help that she must endure Robert's attentions every night now. She is sure this is the fault of Lord and Lady Baratheon. She has heard from the servants and even the odd courtier who had some reason or another to pass by the Master of Ships' office. Ever since getting married, boring, grim, unfriendly, rude Lord Stannis has been rutting his wife in his office. There is no earthly reason for him to do so besides some sort of perversion; they don't even live in the Red Keep! Lord Stannis lives with the Florents in the Florent manse and even Lord Renly has moved there, making his fosterage official. Every day he arrives in time for Small Council in the morning, he shuts himself inside his office if Robert hasn't managed to harange him into showing up for sparring in the Red Keep's training yard, and then Lady Selyse shows up just before lunch and they fuck.

Cersei is sure that it must be because of years of pent up lusts because if she's ever seen a resentful virgin of a man, it's Lord Stannis. Even a plain woman as Lady Selyse suffices and judging by what her servants reports, Lady Selyse is willing to endure his lust and to even incite them. Cersei wants to hate both of them for doing it so that everybody in court knows. Robert knows. And yet. As her Westernmen ladies say, giggling all the while amongst themselves, the dumb cows, Lady Selyse was not being anything except an especially dutiful wife. Dutiful, Cersei scoffs to herself. Most husbands don't demand their marital rights during the day, in a place where ANYBODY could overhear their animalistic noises-! And given the way she sounds- it is not hard- No-! Cersei winces. Difficult- yes, don't think about hard anything-! It is not difficult for Lady Selyse to endure her husband's attentions. Perhaps she is mumming the enjoyment, like a trained whore. And yet. Who would have thought that Lord Stannis, such a stern, rigid- Cersei is annoyed at herself and this sudden deluge of inappropriate words flooding her mind and picks up a plate and heaves it against a far wall, just to hear the smash.

No thoughts. No thoughts, no japes about anything hard, rigid, length, endurance, no, no, no-! She reaches for her wine cup but stops herself in time; when she is in her cups, the thoughts get worse. There are too many who gossip and report all sorts of things on the abilities of the younger Baratheon brother, given the uncouth squealing of the big-nosed, big-arsed Lady Selyse! Why, the boring cow was nearly mute every time she was in court! Dull! Not an expression on her wooden face! Ugh, now she's picturing both of their stupid expressionless faces while copulating. Cersei makes a desperate, choking giggle, imagining Lord Stannis' scowl while he's balls deep in Lady Selyse, her face unsmiling like a doll, while both howled and grunted like farm animals. She's too sober for this! How DARE they make her think about them!

For all she knows, Robert has asked Lord Varys to spy on them and tell him everything, because when before he would heave himself carelessly on top of her while drunk, he now goes about the business with concentration, a task he must do to gain a win, while entirely sober, against his suddenly virile brother.

He's so strong that he can flip her every which way and arrange her to his liking. He doesn't invade her straight away anymore. He takes his time, which is the worst, because she had not known that he was skilled at the bedsport siege. That first night after the wedding at Storm's End, his big hands kneaded her like dough or clay, massaging her back and buttocks until her skin tingled and when he finally reached her breasts, he grinned at her flush and how she stubbornly stifled her cries while he played with her nipples. He made lewd remarks about

how pleasing her breasts are, how they fill his hands, how he likes the expression she makes when he jiggles them. She was shocked by his talking about it at all and in her shock, was overcome by sensation and the long neglect from Jaime (why didn't he visit her at Storm's End!? Surely he wasn't that frightened of Father's presence!) into coupling with him.

His new fixation on her breasts is such that he has introduced a new humiliation to their activities since returning to King's Landing. He gets sweet scented oils and coats her breasts while massaging and rubbing at her nipples. He sat with his legs spread, presenting his hardness at her and she must kneel between his legs. She is made to cup her breasts around him and to rub herself on him, giving him pleasure with the press between her breasts. Cersei thinks she much prefers the times where she is made to take him into her mouth. Then, she doesn't have to look at him or look at it. This way, it is unavoidable. Either she looks at him and has to watch his insultingly satisfied expression, or she must look down and watch the vulgarity of her breasts being used, of his cock sliding in and out between her cleavage obscenely. And he doesn't leave off with flicking and pinching her nipples either, so she cannot distract herself. She did not expect a man with such ungainly big paws for hands to be so deft!

He worked at her and the scent of his musk made her heady. She ached between her legs, her traitorous quim wanted to be filled after all the attention to her breasts. Something in her expression must betray her, because she's hauled up, with him making room by sitting further back on the bed. She straddled his lap and he was suckling and nibbling at her nipples. She could not stifle her cries as he teased her entrance with the tip of his cock.

"You want my stiff cock up inside you, don't you?" he asked in that nasty way that he does when aroused.

"No! Shut your mouth!" Cersei cried, mortified. Why did he have to say such things!?

"Hah!"

He grinned infuriatingly and continued to suckle. He gripped one of her buttocks with one hand and the other went down the front and he rubbed alongside her most sensitive place. That time, she's so aroused that she climaxes from his fingers alone. When she did, she barely had a chance to catch her breath before he gripped her, smoothly plunging into her. She's so wet that she moaned from it, the relief of being filled. He's so strong; he arranged her knees over his shoulders so that she must hang onto his biceps or she should fall, getting no purchase on the bed with her legs. He held her in place as if she weighs nothing while he bounced her up and down his cock. Sometimes, she is grudgingly impressed by his strength when he stands and fucks her like that, not even needing a wall to support her. He is such a big, meaty beast of a man.

Were his attentions to her breasts the worst? No, this must be the worst, Cersei thought. She cannot go limp like when she is on her back and let her mind drift. She must work to stay upright as if on a galloping horse, which clenches her insides against his plunging action, making her moan despite herself from the intense feeling.

She closed her eyes in exasperation as he roared out his pleasure, feeling the spurting motions of his spending. He doesn't pull out. He held her in place, returning to suckling at her nipples

as he waited for his cock to gradually slip out on its own. That merely gives him a pause; he was not done.

Her knees over his shoulders made it easy; he only has to lie back, still trapping her with his arms and now sweaty, to slide her up, bringing her quim to his face.

Cersei wanted to scramble away, to be done with it, but she also needed to come. He gripped her, keeping her close as he greedily licked and kissed her down there and she could not stop her moans. She gasped and bit back curses, grinding on him. She was unconscious of her abandonment; she's cupping and rubbing at her nipples, desperate for sensation. Robert hums to himself in satisfaction as he watches her do so from between her legs. When she does come, it's with a yipping hiccup of sound.

She had no strength left as Robert arranged her onto her back. She was not expecting this kind of endurance, used as she is to Robert immediately succumbing to drunken stupors. But this clearheaded Robert is the Demon of the Trident, the man who won three battles in a day. He has energy to spare, even after a day of training. He didn't crush her under his weight. He gripped her hips to hold her place and gave her inexorable deep strokes of maddening steady rhythm, like the bellows of a smithy. It's too much.

"Admit it, my lusty lioness. Admit that you like how I do you with my cock!"

"Ne- Neveeeeerrrr!"

"Hah!"

Her supreme annoyance at his stupid barking laugh caused her to attempt to rear up and slap him.

"Oh, you want to do battle?" Robert grinned after taking her hit with nary a flinch; she has ended up hurting her hand against his stupid hard head.

Cersei could not comprehend how prepared Robert is, how perverted. He bears down on her with his weight to pin her totally and reaches towards one of the posts of the headboard. A waiting length of soft cord is there and before she can even comprehend what it is he's doing, he's tied her hands together and forced her arms above her head, anchored by the bedpost.

"What- Untie me! Untie me this instant, I am the Queen!"

"Yes, Queen of big tits and wet cunt!" Robert grinned.

Cersei nearly shrieks when Robert bent down, pressed his face between her breasts and made a sloppy raspberry. Somehow he's not bent on finishing, he's bent on torment. He lies there, not moving, while he goes back to suckling and making raspberries on her breasts. Cersei loses energy struggling against the cord, making indignant noises with each slurp and nibble on her nipples.

"Argh, you stupid, idiot, lump-"

"Tsk ts! That's King Stupid Idiot Lump to you, my lady!"

Cersei abandons all decorum and shrieks at Robert.

“Hah!”

He lifted his weight off of her, but with his broad body still pinning her on one leg, and she could do nothing as he hiked up her free knee up, spreading her.

“There’s a greedy cunt,” Robert laughs and he plunged his fingers in, expertly plying her in ways that causes her whole body to jerk. “I love ‘em!”

Cersei cried out from the building pleasure, she cried out from frustration and aggravation, she cried out from the new humiliation of being tied up. Robert is satisfied that she can’t speak words anymore and works her to a new climax and yet another shortly after with his fingers and tongue, chuckling as she wailed her pleasure. She’s incoherent when he returns and he laughs at how she moans at his slow push of his cock back inside. He resumes that slow, even pace and she mindlessly coos softly with his rhythm like a dove. He’s fucked her stupid. She’ll remember to be mad at him for it later.

He finished and untied her.

“I’ll remember this!” she managed to mutter.

“I should hope so, my lady!” Robert still had the energy to laugh.

It has been like this ever since. Sometimes he doesn’t open his stupid mouth too much and Cersei allows herself to be robustly seduced. Sometimes, he purposefully incites her with his words and she is roused into hitting him, to which he responds with tying her down and subjecting her to purposeful teasings and punishments; some evenings he even spansks her arse, which she truly loathes to admit excites her. Cersei doesn’t want to admit it, but Robert is an exciting fuck. A long lasting fuck. A driven fuck. She always had to sneak around with Jaime before, to stifle her cries, to fear being discovered. Now that Robert has a form of competition with his brother, he wants to show that he is the top, the king, by fucking his queen every night.

She supposes she can tolerate it. She still hates his stupid, idiot ways, of course. His stupid laugh. But she’ll tolerate his cock. She sighs, and bites into a slice of roast duck. Is this what Father wants? Perhaps if she can get Robert satiated enough, she can start to direct him in ways that favor the goals of the Lannisters? But what can they be? Father doesn’t write to tell her anything. Nothing that the Lord Hand is doing seems to be anything except thanklessly reasonable and the same goes for everybody else on the Small Council. Pycelle hasn’t said that there is anything he is reporting to Father either. She doesn’t want to befriend Lady Arryn or Lady Baratheon! So there! She is the Queen, why should she! They ought to be trying to befriend her!

Somewhere in the Westerlands: A Lone Seeking

Chapter Notes

Warning: unsympathetic retelling of the story of Tyrion and Tysha. Also, yet another miscarriage for Lysa.

Imry adjusts the close-fitting leather cap that made Lady Lysa laugh behind her hand and say made him look like a member of House Frey. He didn't mind; it hid his ears very well indeed, as well as making his face more forgettable. It crossed at a very unflattering angle over his forehead, with a half-assed flappy short brim sewn on the front to keep the sun out of his eyes. What's more, one of the chin straps was longer than the other, giving him a sad, hangdog lopsided effect. Perfect. It's been a number of moons since he's left Storm's End. He's climbed up the tree where he has tied his mule and he's checking the map he has of the Westerlands. He's done his time in Lannisport, mumming being a mummer and having fun besides in succeeding.

He sang while drumming, and when he needs to preserve his voice he's not bad on the flute. All those years playing and singing at Brightwater Keep has paid off; he gets enough coppers most days to afford inn rooms. He's different; his hands are deft enough for spins and juggles of his drumsticks mid-beat, he alternates with beats on the ground, he uses a taller one-sided drum that he can tilt with his feet in order to adjust the tone, he can coax out varied rhythms that practically nobody except for family have heard before. He is very glad that Selyse took the time to help him refine his performance for the road and busking. Of course, he has silvers sewn into the hem of his roughspun jerkin, but that's for emergencies. He's moved methodically through Lannisport, from pub to inn, from tavern to winesink, singing a few songs to quick enough approval of the owners, and earning enough from the other patrons to pay for meals and drinks that he nurses very carefully while watching and asking questions. He even manages to get some odd jobs, singing with a few other mummers at a few private parties held by one wealthy merchant or another.

The real mummers complimented him on his voice and his steady rhythm on the drums. They say if he were to join up with a troupe he could very well make a name for himself, and afford brighter clothes, suitable for entering the halls of lords.

He finds out which pubs are preferred by Lannister guards. Here he must be most careful and he cannot afford to arouse suspicion. He visits often enough to be familiar, to establish a shallow sense of trust in his harmlessness and that he is suitably amusing to have around. He can sing any song anybody wishes to hear, he can tell a good jape also, and he always remembers to keep his accent broad and drawling, to hide his cut glass noble Reacher accent.

Patiently, patiently, he gets invited to drink with them and he bows and nods most gratefully each time. He acts awed around them, asking innocent questions of what it was like to serve

such a great lord as Lord Lannister, how wonderful their shiny swords and armor are. He whispers with wide eyes that he is sure that he doesn't have the stomach to do the brave and awful things they must be ordered to do; have any of them been there that day that the song of Rains of Castamere was born?

His ridiculous flattery works and he is frankly amazed by how loose-lipped the guards are after drinks and a round of bootlicking. It really is as Selyse said; everybody else didn't know about operational security. Not like us. They laugh and slap his back, they boast that yes, one or another were there that day, oh no, you're much too young, 'twas I who was there, not you-

They spend hours regaling him with tales of what they did and saw the day the Houses Reyne and Tarbeck were destroyed root and stem. He acts overawed by it all and asks what else have they done? What has been memorable to them, in all their years of duty? Some personal service to House Lannister, perhaps? Why, he could not even think of what he himself, so humble and good for nothing except singing, could do to serve such a Lord.

"It's not all killing, boy," one of the guards say.

"Aye, aye, sometimes you just knock heads and throw unruly drunks out of inns and taverns."

"But if you more a lover than a fighter, Lord Lannister has uses for a man like that too!"

They laugh at his curious, confused expression.

"Must have been wanting to teach the Little Lion how to go about it, or summat, yeah?" yet another guard mentioned. "That night with the whore?"

"Yes, yes, the whore! Tell him the story! You'll not hear the like again and it was a great night!"

And they tell him the terrible story. They laugh about how practically a troop of them were ordered to some cottage near the shore and to show the Little Lion one after another how to properly fuck a woman, using a whore that Lord Lannister had brought for the purpose. It goes to show how efficient, how masterly Lord Tywin was, to not want his son totally ignorant of such things, even though he was a dwarf. They praised Lord Tywin's generosity, for they were handed one silver each before they took their turns, and they very correctly put their silvers into the whore's hand when they were finished. Why, she was alright for a bit of skirt herself, young like the young lord and well enough for sport, for all that she just laid there not making a sound. After this very practical demonstration, Lord Tywin pushed his son forward and they very respectfully waited for the young man to take his turn. Why, Lord Tywin put a gold coin into Tyrion Lannister's hand for the whore's final payment! A wonderful, generous man, is Lord Tywin!

Imry did not grit his teeth, chanting silently to himself that emotion was dangerous to his mission. He must feel his rage and disgust later; useless emotion gets one killed in the now. He nodded and smiled and agreed that Lord Tywin was certainly very generous, so very generous. Would- would they happen to know where this whore was? Did she work for any

particular madam or procurer or was she a lone street walker? He thought he might like a go himself, since their story was so inspiring.

They all roundly agreed that none of them had ever seen her again in any of the whorehouses within Lannisport. Nor had any of them seen her loitering about street corners or the piers alone. Perhaps she operated out of that cottage? They could give him directions.

He's followed the coast and did find the cottage, precisely as they say, which was lucky is as lucky does. He did not find that girl there. There was a crofter family there, though, and after singing a few more songs and giving them some coppers, they were willing to tell him that they do recall that a girl used to live there alone, but she has since moved on.

He rolls up his map and climbs down from the tree. He mounts the mule and makes his way down the road. Apparently there is a nameless village across a bridge that he can find and he'll try asking around there.

He does not reach his destination unaccosted. A pair of bandits, judging that a lone mummer wearing nothing more threatening than trios of ribbon bows on his shirt sleeves and a drum slung over his shoulder looked a fair target. They sprung up from the hedges on either side of the path, one of them grabbing hold the mule's reins. The mule reared but was held fast.

"Your valuables or your life, lad!" the second cried, brandishing a sword with the top third of the blade broken off.

The one holding the mule's reins has a better sword and Imry couldn't reach for the cudgel hanging off his belt faster than the man could stab him.

"We're taking the mule too! Get down!"

Imry held his hands up after dismounting.

The bandit with the broken sword lowers it to step closer, reaching out to grab at the coin pouch on Imry's belt.

He was definitely not expecting Imry to surge forward, grabbing the bandit's shoulder with his right hand, and driving his empty left hand forward toward his throat.

There is a wet sound when a blade sprang out from Imry's sleeve, impaling the bandit cleanly.

The second bandit managed to try attacking Imry, but the surprise was on Imry's side; he shoved the first bandit's body at the second one, distracting him for a few precious seconds, snatched the broken sword from the first bandit, parried and made a clean slice to the juncture of that man's neck and shoulder with the blade at his left hand. The man dropped after making a terrible cry.

Imry stood, breathing hard.

He's just killed his first men.

Their blood is somehow very red, more red than he remembers the blood of livestock being butchered back in Brightwater Keep or the blood of prey bagged on hunts in their woods. On the other hand, there wasn't very much of it. Fattened calves and hogs for slaughter had buckets and buckets of blood compared to these two dead criminal unfortunates. They didn't even stink of offal too much, not like the powerful stench of Brightwater Keep's slaughterhouse. Imry is glad that Uncle Colin insisted on him and Erren assisting the butchers during their squiring to get them used to the smell and look of blood and guts. The looks frozen on the mens' faces by death are terrible to look upon. Imry shakes his head. No time for that.

He kneels and wipes the hidden blade on the shirt of the first bandit. He stands back up and flicks his left hand up. The steel ring on his finger tugs on the wire that runs to the cam on the hardware that triggers the inner springs and the blade retracts into hidden position.

He'll feel excited about the blade working in field conditions later. He has to hide the bodies. He drags them away from the road by their armpits (Imry thought it very suspicious that Selyse was able to casually advise him and Erren on the most convenient way to manhandle dead bodies) and uses the sword to chop their heads off. He gets the bodies under some shrubs and takes the utility spade he kept in one of the saddle bags to hurriedly dig small holes for the heads under another shrub further away on the opposite side of the path. He would rather bury all of them, but he doesn't want to be caught lingering. He checks himself; there are luckily no blood stains. He kicks the dirt around where they stopped him and mounts up, having his mule turn a few circles to further muddy the evidence with hoof prints. He decides he can barter the swords, rusty as they are, later, and secures them to the saddle.

He rides on.

If there is no inn in the upcoming village, he'll just have to find a friendly crofter who doesn't mind him sleeping in the barn for a few coppers.

Imry starts to whistle a tune as he approaches the bridge.

Inside the Small Council chamber, Stannis straightens the edge of his stack of papers. He has popped his head in on Robert's office and he has seen that Robert is present. Robert cannot show up every single day. However, he does show up every other, which is a great improvement. Furthermore, he shows up because he must let Lord Arryn know how well the Gold Cloak and Marine recruits are doing.

Selyse has told him that however much the idea insults him, when Lord Steffon died, Robert transferred the bulk of his filial respect and love to Lord Arryn. She says that it is likely that much of Robert's shirking of responsibility has come from him quickly seeking out another father figure in the unknowing ignorant manner of a duckling imprinting on something not its true mother. Stannis had scoffed at that, until Selyse fixed him with a terrible, knowing, sympathetic stare, and taking his hand, softly asked if he had not done the same with Maester Cressen.

It was really unsettling, how observant his wife was.

Robert did not do the writing of most of his reports. He needed staff for that. However, he did not wave away the minutiae this time. Each recruit had his own file, as recommended by Alekyne and Selyse's notes. Each recruit had weekly weigh ins, weekly records of how many sit ups, push ups, chin ups, and burpees he could complete within a time limit. They all had to run 3 miles in under 30 minutes. The Marine recruits who could not adapt to this regimen were allowed to transfer into the Gold Cloaks, if they wished. Exceptional Gold Cloak recruits were allowed to transfer into the Marines if they wished for more potential glory and a higher salary.

Selyse found that when the staff organized the progress of the recruits into bar charts, line charts, and pie charts, that Robert was most excited and attentive. Columns of numbers overwhelmed him. So they did, even making a large poster to chart the number of recruits who could pass the physical fitness testing. Robert would stand in front of the poster and chortle to himself as he saw the line inching upward every week. Stannis was eager for the recruits to be promoted into the regulars and for platoons to be assigned to individual ships in the Fleet; they needed to secure the coasts against pirates.

The rest of the Small Council saw the effectiveness of communicating to Robert with visual charts and the Master of Coin was able to show that Robert definitely could not feast or throw so many tourneys if he wanted to pay for the salaries of the Marines and Gold Cloaks, along with weapons and armor. Robert saw the charts, nodded in comprehension, joked that he had no time for such things since he was so busy whipping the recruits into shape, and then asked about the progress with said weapons and armor.

And here, Robert was again being reasonable as Ser Barristan and Lord Arryn put in their advice. They made discussion about balancing combat effectiveness and cost, with needing to bear the differences that came from exposure to the sea and salt, and potentially getting dumped overboard into water.

For that last consideration, Selyse had ideas (of course) and quickly came up with a cotton jerkin that was covered entirely with narrow compartments filled with cork. There was even a wide collar that was basically a pouch, stuffed tightly with pieces of cork, to better ensure that a person's head stayed above water. Davos cheerfully put it on to test over a steel breastplate, jumping overboard with a rope tied around his waist. He didn't sink like a stone, but he only barely managed to keep his head above the surface, before he needed to be pulled out. The cork float jacket was perfectly adequate on Davos when he was wearing regular clothes. Stannis reported that in the case of the Marines they simply cannot use plate armor. They weren't insane like certain Ironmen.

For the Marines they settled on cloth gambesons stuffed with cork and brigandines. Helmets, gorgets, vambraces and greaves would be made out of steel. Production was also ordered of cork float jackets for all the current sailors and rowers. The amounts of cotton and wool coming out of the Florent mills made this very cost effective. It was very fortunate that the Reach had plenty of mature cork oak groves on holdings besides the Florents such as Crane, Oldflowers and Varner; the groves usually provided additional income from House Redwyne during their bottling cycles. Said Houses were very glad that Lord Alester let them know ahead of time that the Crown would have need of their cork in addition to the tin jarring interests. The Marines would be issued a combat knife and cutlass. In the case of landing

operations, they were trained to use shield and halberd. All of them were capable of operating the scorpions of the Royal Fleet as well as crossbows. Each ship would also have specialized detachments of archers. The Gold Cloaks' armories were inventoried and worn out armor and weapons were sent out to be smelted and reforged.

This Small Council session, Robert was quite proud to announce that the first hundred of Royal Marines were ready. Fifty each were ready to be deployed onto the Fury and King Robert's Hammer, if it suits Stannis. He would have another two hundred in perhaps two weeks, as these hundred were the best. Stannis thanked Robert formally and the matter was closed.

Lord Arryn reported that a network of semaphore signal towers along the Westerlands coast was authorized by Lord Tywin and that a main line of towers from Lannisport to King's Landing along the Gold Road has been completed. This in addition to the line coming from Old Town to King's Landing along the Rose Road, with towers being set up along the Reach coasts. Lord Hoster Tully was still being a recalcitrant skeptic about the benefits of the semaphore system; he and Lady Lysa were going to write more letters.

Ser Barristan reported that Ser Boros was injured again from yet another mandated training session at the Dragonpit.

"Gods, what use is he?" Robert cried out, banging his fist on the table. "What am I to do with the slow lump? And the rest of them?"

"No other injuries, Your Grace."

"Of course not," Robert huffed.

He stood up and went over to the wooden treadmill that Selyse recommended he set up in the Small Council chamber. Many eyebrows were raised the first time they saw it, but Robert saw the sense of anything that would keep him awake; he surely wouldn't go to sleep while walking. He stepped on and set a brisk pace.

Pycelle reported that the Royal Library was finally reorganized to the Florent Decimal System, though he did mutter that he did not see the point of it. Stannis sniffed derisively to himself at that. (Soon, the Florents would infiltrate the Royal Library and start making off with the information they needed. Should Pycelle protest, well, King Robert says his good-kin have license to access the library freely. Hah.) The Master of Coin reported that the treasury was holding steady, with greater income from agricultural exports from the Crownlands; the biogas digesters were already paying for themselves with the dramatically better yields from the compost produced, the four-field system, and Alekyne Florent's seed drills and horse-drawn harvesters, sold on to the Crownland lords for their smallfolk farmers. Lord Arryn added that Alekyne Florent was making progress with his project developing a threshing machine. The Master of Laws reported on the progress of establishing the Small Claims Court of King's Landing, which would reduce the amount of petitions to the Lord Hand (and therefore Robert when he did sit for petitions) having to do with landlord disputes, merchants' disputes, and the like.

"Well. What about you, Varys? Anything about the Ironmen threat?"

“Lord Greyjoy does build ships, Your Grace. But when or if he chooses to make use of them...” Varys held up open palms in a shrug. “My birds hear no plans.”

“Perhaps it is still possible to avert conflict,” Lord Arryn said. “Send an envoy to Lord Balon, see if he can be convinced to be reasonable.”

“A fair warning? Why not. He probably won’t listen. Didn’t even show up at my coronation! Sent in a raven written by his maester to pledge fealty and you ought to see the mess he made of his signature! That illiterate pirate thinks himself tough enough to rise against me! Me!”

Robert waved a fist in the air.

“Why, I do want to see him try! I’ll smash him like I smashed Rhaegar! Hah!”

“Nonetheless,” Lord Arryn tried.

“Right, right. Pick who you want, possibly people you don’t mind losing. He might think to kill them and send us their heads in boxes as his first opening move. Hah! Send Ser Boros as part of the envoy! Representative of my Royal Presence, what say you?”

“Your Grace,” Ser Barristan sighed.

“What? ‘Twas a jape! Though, if that frees up a space on the Kingsguard for somebody competent...”

“As you say, Your Grace,” Ser Barristan reluctantly agreed.

“Well, I think he ought to go,” Robert jutted his jaw stubbornly. “He survives, then he at least manages one service to the Crown and one line under his name in the White Book. He doesn’t make it? No skin off my nose. By the order of your King it is.”

Lord Arryn sighed and made a note.

“Stannis? Your turn.”

“Almost all captains, first mates, and navigators are fully educated on the use of the sextant and book, Your Grace.”

“Almost? It’s been moons. Why the delay?”

Stannis blinked, but didn’t scowl.

“Davos is still learning how to read and write, Your Grace.”

“Huh. Does this mean that everybody except Davos can do it? That he has a navigator already that can find the way?”

“Yes.”

“Well, don’t scare me like that, man! I thought if the Ironmen struck tomorrow, we’d be fucked because our fleet would be slowed at the Stepstones!”

Stannis acknowledged that he ought to have been more clear, and then went down the progress report of the retrofitting of the fleet.

“Good, good, sounds good. We’ll be ready for those Ironmen bastards. Any further news?”

Stannis folded his hands over his papers.

“Yes. Lady Selyse is with child.”

Robert whooped and practically leapt over the handrail of his treadmill to rush over and start slapping Stannis’ back. Stannis tolerated this while the rest of the Small Council made well wishes. After the rest of the Small Council exited the chamber, Robert clapped his hands.

“Family dinner, here in the Red Keep to celebrate, what do you say? Bring Renly too!”

Stannis allowed that it was acceptable.

He had been encouraged to say yes occasionally to Robert by Selyse, so that he would be kept happy with small requests instead of ramping up to unreasonable kingly demands and orders by their mutual stubbornness. A dinner (not a feast!) was reasonable.

“How far along?”

“Perhaps four moons.”

“... Still vulnerable. Keeping it quiet until she shows, eh?”

“Yes. Especially since Lady Arryn...”

Robert nodded and they stood awkwardly silent; Lady Arryn lost the pregnancy that she had so happily had during Stannis and Selyse’s wedding.

“Well,” Robert cleared his throat. “See you all at dinner, Stannis.”

“We will be there,” Stannis paused. “Robert.”

Robert gave him another hard, affectionate thump on his shoulder, beaming. Selyse said that it was necessary to keep Robert well disposed towards them by being so much more pleasing than Queen Cersei and the Westermen contingent at court. That it was possible with as little as some informality. Stannis supposed it was so.

He had not expected to be comfortable with the cheerful duplicity of the Florents when it came to court dealings, but he supposed once again that though they preferred to be clear and straightforward with him and liked him for his own bluntness, it delighted them to be underhanded, that it gave them some sort of pleasure to play with others to get their way, whereas he was impatient. Well, given that him simply telling Robert what he wanted never resulted in him getting what he wanted in the past, when subtlety as practiced by the Florents

got him the results he wanted, he supposed it was the result that mattered, not the technique, no matter how uncomfortable it made him.

King's Landing: Robert Labors

After the dinner celebrating her pregnancy, Selyse informed Stannis that she will not be joining him for lunch the next day. This will be a lunch with Robert. Stannis nods. Ever since their marriage in Storm's End, Selyse has been having these private conversations with Robert every two weeks, with only Megga, whom she trusts totally, and Ser Barristan, who has his oaths as a Kingsguard, as witnesses. They speak in the true privacy of the middle of the Red Keep's godswood, sitting on chairs brought out by servants and eating bread bundles. Megga and Ser Barristan are within earshot, but not in direct line of sight.

The first few lunches, she asked about Lord Steffon and Lady Cassana. She asked Robert about what he remembers of them and asked if he had ever told Renly about them. He is startled by the realization that Renly can't know the things that Stannis and he do about their parents. That he has never taken the time to comfort the boy. Did he expect Stannis to do it? Back when he frowned all the time? How was that fair? How was Stannis capable of such a task? For even Selyse is not unwilling to admit that Stannis is so often uncomfortable that conversing with him was a dratted chore in court and council. To have Stannis speak on their parents, an emotional topic- why, Robert could predict no good outcome of that.

She encourages him to take the time to tell Renly what he knows. He is glad to do so.

The next times after, she asks him about his fostering in the Eyrie, about what he thinks about Lord Jon Arryn. He is enthusiastic, recounting the fun of his squiring, making friends with Ned, and the hunts he had in the Vale. She asks if he thought Lord Jon is happy with him. Proud of him. He admits that probably not at all in the beginning of his reign. But now that he has a project in the form of training the Royal Marines and the Gold Cloaks and the King's Landing levies, he feels more awake and alive than he ever has after being crowned King. He knows why he wakes up in the morning, he says. By training these men, he's doing something to please the Warrior and is protecting the Realm.

She asks him about Stannis and Renly for their next conversations. He remembers that he never understood why Stannis wouldn't just let things go or admit that Robert would win every time during their boyhood scuffles. He didn't understand how every time he brought up his wins and laughed about it with the squires, it only made Stannis more angry, more hateful. Selyse pointed out that both of them had the fury, but whereas he stormed and shouted and threw things and punched people immediately before subsiding just as quickly to japing and laughter, Stannis had learned to retreat, to be silent in his room, to grind his teeth and think on the injustice of it. And when he had enough from an insult too many, he would explode when Robert least expected it, having forgotten that Stannis was angry in the first place, repeatedly blind to Stannis' way of hiding his temper until he could not as a boy and they were brawling all over again with one wrong word, a look askance, or an ill-timed smile. One wouldn't expect it now, but a younger Stannis was very liberal with gutshots (since he once screamed that it was useless to aim for Robert's stupid thick head and expect any improvement) and had a kick like a mule.

“I’m frankly amazed the two of you survived boyhood, with your stories of shoving each other down hills and stairways and off horses,” Selyse dryly observed. “Though, given the times Imry and Erren have slammed onto the ground after losing their grips on Brightwater Keep’s walls, perhaps boys will always be testing how bouncy their bones are in youth.”

Robert laughed and shrugged. He agreed that as the two of them were grown men, they ought to work together with less shouting.

“I would, but he says the worst things in the worst way. I know I’m not the swiftest but when he sneers like I’m an idiot well- I lose my head,” Robert admits. “So I’m a boy all over again and I want to headlock him until he cries.”

“Do work on that, Robert. I am doing the same with Stannis.”

Robert is comfortable enough to complain about how Stannis is so inflexible.

“Sometimes ill fortune happens. He doesn’t believe it should be so! Well, it does, so there, you just... well you can’t do much, can you? You let it go, I think. Forget about it. He never forgets!”

“He’s not like you, Robert.”

“Is it that simple?” Robert snorts.

“Well. I have a theory that perhaps this is yet another way that the death of your parents has wrought you two differently as men. You enjoy uncertainty and you seek excitement. You hunt, you drink. You want sensation to distract you from your sorrows. Stannis doesn’t want excitement. He wants the safety that he lost as a young boy. Of parents who were well and happy and can do no wrong and are the strongest people in the world of a child. What is safety? Control. Stannis exercises control because when he has control, he is safe. You go on attack. He will build his walls and ramparts. I dare say, you could not have asked for anybody better to hold off a siege with his ways. Perhaps it’s the Estermont showing in him stronger than you. A tougher shell and wanting to pull inside when disturbed and waiting until it is safe to come back out again. Slower to forgive. A turtle-ish sort of way.”

Robert sat, eyebrows raised.

“Huh. That makes sense. I don’t know if it’s true, but it sounds about right.”

“Truthy?” Selyse made a wry grin.

“Hah! Yes! Truthy!”

“And Renly?”

“I definitely do not know him so well as I should,” Robert said. “He’s so young! I don’t know what to do with a young boy like that! That’s why I’m glad he has friends with your cousins and brothers. I’m assuming he’s been affected by Father and Mother dying too. You tell Stannis that we ought to have more dinners in the Red Keep. I’ll ask Renly about his studies

then, right? And train him if he likes, once he gets strong enough. Perhaps he'll find he suits a hammer like me!"

"Good idea, Robert."

She asked about Ned Stark, his brother by choice. He laughed when he recounted all the fun they had together and how he was mystified at first by Ned's exotic Northern ways. He remembered trying to figure out if Ned's oddness was because he was a Northman or because he was shy or what. They thrashed each other in the training yard and Robert offered him his hand and it was as simple as that; their friendship started and Robert never thought anything could come between them.

"But you do not speak of him now, do you? What happened?"

It took fits and starts, Robert huffing and pacing, and finally he laboriously recounted the moment in the Throne Room, where he laughed in a fugue of hatred upon seeing the corpses of the royal children.

"Ned could not stand it, of course. Good, honorable Ned. Of course not! We yelled at each other and I only thought- I just thought that I was getting something back from Rhaegar. He took from me, so see how now he's lost something of his own! I didn't- I didn't care that it was innocent children. I was mad. It's what it is, you know. Fury, mad, madness. And then I said to Ned he ought to think on it as I, because he lost his own father and Brandon- But- Ned, he went stark- Hah- white and then red and he started to scream at me- So I screamed back-"

Robert banged his fist down on the arm of his chair.

"I don't know what to do!"

"You could write him a letter."

Robert wrinkled his nose.

"You could say exactly what you just said to me. That you were not thinking and that it is the truth. That you know that he has the right of it. That you value your friendship too much to have it die with an argument that came from the heat of your anger. That you know that it was a cruel thing to do and that in your fury, you showed him an ugly side of yourself that you beg forgiveness for. You are better than that, Robert."

Robert nodded.

"Still. Can't make up for what happened to the children."

"No," Selyse agreed. "And perhaps you may be destroyed by Lord Tywin's choice. Why should you let that happen?"

"Huh. How do you reckon?"

“The Martells hate Lord Tywin. That is clear. But they may also hate you, because it is your power to do justice in their name, and you have not yet. You are the King. You do have the power to order Lord Tywin to give over Ser Gregor and Ser Armory to the Martells.”

Robert hemmed and drummed his fingers.

“Lord Tywin won’t like that.”

“No. There is no way to come out of this without angering one or the other of the Great Houses. Yet you must do this, precisely because you are King. Lord Tywin waited quite some time before declaring for you, remember. The children might have become hostages, given over to the Faith for the Princess and then the Wall for Prince Aegon. Oberynt Martell is spitting mad and he’s not called the Red Viper for nothing. The Targaryens have taken from them too, Robert. I was there in Harrenhal that day. That day when it all started. Don’t you remember how all the Dornish reacted when Elia was passed over?”

Robert grunted.

“They have lost in one blow a beloved sister, nephew, and niece. Even now, they must plot against Lord Tywin. Even now, they must hate you for standing aside. We cannot afford unrest and civil war within the realm, Robert. Don’t you agree?”

“I do. But still. Ordering Lord Tywin about is a quick way to gain his hatred, King or not. I know and you know how powerful he is. That dratted song reminds all of us.”

“Also true. One would have to plan pretty carefully. Yet he is still a Lord Paramount sworn to you, the King, and for all that you owe him for the peace by marrying Cersei, he owes you for any future unrest from the Dornish, a constant threat to your dynasty. They ever say Lannisters pay their debts. And of course, it wouldn’t be easy to bring down the Mountain.”

“I probably could.”

“Please don’t try.”

“Hah!”

Robert had not thought these talks with Lady Selyse would be so interesting when it came to ruling. He must admit, he had not paid so much attention to Jon’s lessons about being a Lord Paramount. So it was something of a shock that a Lady knew quite so much about the business of ruling. But he knows better than to dismiss Selyse; she may be the smartest of the younger Florents. Lord Florent seems as canny as their sigil; he will not allow his House to be caught unaware by untimely deaths. Should he and Alekyne fall, Imry and all the other young Florents are well versed on how to protect their House’s holdings. This education was extended to the womenfolk of that House and Robert heard tell that as their House was founded by a woman, Florys the Fox, it simply was their way. Robert must admit that he is like Stannis in that he doesn’t have patience with the underhanded ways of court. He can admit that he hasn’t a guileful bone in his body. Yet he has the ability to notice how Selyse has drawn out the Crownlands lords sworn to Dragonstone directly in court, how she and her kin have sniffed out any dissent and troublemaking, have pinned them down into place

through their guile, with evidence, not just hearsay, and had them helpless while Stannis remorselessly came down upon them like a hammer. If Targaryen loyalists weren't going to accept the honorable negotiations of good Jon Arryn, well, let them be savaged by the Florents and subject to the slim mercies of his brother. Hah!

Jon had cautioned him about being too readily amenable to the suggestions of the Florents; after all, however nicely worded and however flattering they were, they looked to their own interests. Robert scoffed to himself; as Alekyne and any number of Florents are wont to say, it was only logical. But they were good folk, Robert felt. He'd rather trust them than the likes of Lord Tywin Lannister. He could trust in how Stannis was being less of a stubborn arse, how Renly was smiling again. He can trust in that the Florents took the time to explain things so that he could understand, while making sure that he didn't feel stupid while doing it.

Not even Jon managed that. But Selyse was right, when she asked him; What would be the Big Audacious Boast of his dynasty? Why, that the Baratheons are Better than Targaryens! Robert could definitely understand that! He could trust that Jon and the Florents weren't about to let him run off half-cocked as King and that a better age, a Baratheon Golden Age, would follow that would put the efforts of King Jaehaerys to shade. Robert liked the sound of that!

He was prepared to laugh at Stannis during the betrothal; Stannis never listened to him about anything and Lady Selyse was shaping up to be a real harridan, no matter how suitable her House, from his memories of her back at Harrenhal. And yet, Stannis returned to court after betrothal negotiations and formally meeting her not scowling more, not sulking more, not... unhappy. It made him curious and even more after trying to find out what Stannis thought of his betrothed; that resulted in Stannis becoming as ruffled as a cat with its tail pulled and telling him to mind his own business. Robert wouldn't have persisted if the man wasn't blushing!

And lo and behold, the next time the two of them were in public at court, there were the two of them, tall and correct and with Stannis stone faced. One would think nothing at all changed for Stannis. And yet, he stared at her, he stood a little too close, and Selyse would look back at him just as intently and occasionally she would smile at something Stannis said and Stannis looked... amazed. It simply tickled Robert! Why, he could barely believe it when he first noticed an instance of Stannis being prickly and snappish and Selyse managing to soothe him into ceasing his teeth grinding in court with a few softly spoken words and a touch to his elbow.

Robert never thought overly much about what Stannis was like around women. He'd invited him, once, to go with him to a brothel, a brotherly thing to share when Stannis had his sixteenth nameday. Well. He'd lied about where they were going and then had to drag him along like a mule. Ned shook his head the one time he tried the same invitation in the past, in the Vale, and solemnly stood in the brothel parlor like a guard, politely discouraging any advances. It wasn't fun, but he was able to accept that apparently Ned wanted to remain a virgin, as baffling as that was. At least they were able to go out drinking, later. But, Stannis. Once the scantily dressed women on offer lined up for inspection, Stannis' face puckered as if he'd shoved an entire lemon into his mouth and galloped right out of the place like a spooked horse. Robert tried to stop him, but he was a fast bugger when he was affronted.

Baffling! Why, the place he took them to was a better quality than Robert's usual, with whores that had all their teeth, even!

Perhaps he's like Ned and needs the trappings of proper courting, Robert then thought, but it was not so. Ned was shy, but he managed to dance during feasts. One could tell when a woman turned Ned's head; the tragically lovely Ashara Dayne was only the most celebrated beauty who Ned sighed after. Robert had chuckled and poked at Ned for his subtle, easily overlooked contemplations of fair Vale maidens in their youth. At the next available feast when Robert visited from the Vale, Robert had especially invited over some comely Vale lasses for Stannis, some who were rumored to be game for sport; knights' daughters who wouldn't be too fussed over a single tumble in the night, though you had to flatter and flirt and dance with them first. Stannis wouldn't ask them to dance, he certainly wouldn't talk to them, and when one of the girls boldly put her hand on his while leaning forward to let him look at her teats, Stannis almost jumped backward as if he were burnt! He glared at everybody as if they were coming at him with knives drawn and started grinding his teeth. In public. At a feast. Robert despaired over his ridiculous brother and led the nicely teated knight's daughter off for dancing and fucked her under a table later when everybody was deeply in their cups, hidden by the table cloth. He gave up after that; if Stannis wanted to be such a bore, it was no skin off his nose. He had Ned and all his other friends anyway!

When Robert noticed Stannis glancing at Selyse's very nice arse once or twice, he was gladdened because it proved that his brother was not actually made out of stone. Yet when he mentioned it in private, for once able to share an opinion about women with Stannis, Stannis turned on him like a jealous dog over a bone. Robert gamely allowed Stannis to pummel him for a few seconds, warning off the White Cloaks with a look, but was surprised when Stannis would not let up, not like the usual when they had a little scuffle. He was serious. He wasn't going to retreat; he had the idea that Robert would actually take something that he had just discovered that he wanted for himself and he would. Not. Tolerate. It!

Robert felt for the first time that Stannis was capable of murdering him in a blind rage. Over the love of a woman. Robert was thrilled! Stannis wasn't a cold fish, really! He just had to be motivated! Robert luckily didn't laugh while he maneuvered to get Stannis into a headlock. Robert may be a slow learner but even he got that to laugh at Stannis in the middle of the fight just gives him more motivation to beat your face in. They flailed around on the floor (very undignified for a King and a member of Small Council) until Robert had him pinned. Stannis was reduced to cursing at him and Robert was further thrilled by the fact that his brother knew profanity. Creative profanity, even! He was even a tinge insulted about being called a Motherfucker. The Florents were good for Stannis, indeed!

It took the better part of an hour before he could let go without Stannis immediately trying to throttle him. Finally Robert realized that he could only let go after promising that he wasn't going to even look at Lady Selyse.

Honestly. She was small-teated and sharp tongued with a sharper mind. And though he's smart enough to not say that she's plain out loud (her brothers were menaces) she was simply that. Plain. He knew when he was outmatched and she was distinctly disinterested. She certainly didn't treat him as anything but... well a little brother, Robert imagined. He had observed how she fussed over her own brothers and that she had adopted the same manners

towards him. Robert had never been treated in such a manner before; almost motherly, but not quite due to their closeness in age. He supposed he liked it enough to not wish to change things at all! It wasn't as if Cersei would take any time or consideration to remind him to eat his vegetables or to dilute his wine with fruit juices for his health! Besides the present danger his own jealous brother presented to him, he suspected if he did manage to compromise Lady Selyse's honor, her male kin would assassinate him. And get away with it. Unless said lady got around to killing him herself. Lady Selyse has made certain dry observations about the size of the Red Keep's chandeliers that Robert cannot say for certain are jests.

And Renly! Robert can see him finding fast friendships with Omer and Merrell as strong as his friendship with Ned. They jested and ran about with their young boys' games and he was happy, Robert can tell. When he sits to speak with him about their parents, Renly is easier to speak to than Stannis. The mysterious differences between himself and Stannis, what Selyse called the stronger Estermont in Stannis, does not seem to be in Renly. Renly didn't stand to the side like a judgemental wet cat in a crowd while at court. Renly smiled and bowed and the Florents trained him with better courtesies suited for court. Jon liked how Renly was turning out, so why should Robert worry? Even Stannis approved, so surely it was well!

There was nobody who could outdo him in battle, Robert reckoned, in war. Good old Jon was wise, experienced, and honorable; the perfect Hand. But to be at his back, to make sure that Lord Tywin didn't overstep and flank him, Robert reckoned he could do worse than trust the trickiest folk he had ever met. They treated the tiresome rigmarole of court like a game and were quick to warn him of other lords trying to con him. Well, his pride was stung, but Alekyne was so frank and kind, Robert couldn't stay mad, of course. Let the other lords try to con him, when he had the Florents on his side, hah!

Robert finally promised that he would write that letter to Ned. And furthermore, after he finished, because he felt he ought to with all his generous heart, he added a convoy of gifts for Winterfell. Crates full of empty tin jars and lids with the book on how to go about preserving. Bolts of good milled wool and cotton cloth. A seed drill and a harvester with instructions and plans for the building of more. When Alekyne got around to making a working thresher, he'll have one built and shipped up too. He added books; story books for the children, a text on double entry bookkeeping, the manual explaining the semaphore warning towers system, a book on how to set up biogas digesters with instructions for a gas grill, a waterwheel powered steel mill, and charcoal production with iron retorts. For speed, they go by ship, along with one of the scholars of Brightwater Keep, to explain the new technologies to Ned and his Maester, heading to White Harbor.

He then, after consulting with the Small Council, gave the order to improve the condition of the King's Road. He wants to be able to visit Ned in the future, perhaps, and he doesn't trust long voyages by ship. He thinks to himself that in this way Stannis is braver than he, for he still distrusts the sea after the death of his parents. Stannis defies the sea and in fact has taken his position of Master of Ships as if to say he is now Master of the Sea also. By ordering this, he unleashed the years of note taking and research conducted by the Florents and Maester Bryan for the engineering of roads. They took their experience from improving the roads within Florent holdings and sized it up for kingdom scale. The Small Council had to add a Master of Engineering, who was in charge of the teams of surveyors, engineers, workers, and guards for the workers.

This latest conversation would be the most fraught that Selyse had ever attempted.

“Robert, tell me about Lyanna Stark.”

He isn't as surprised as she expected. Perhaps he's canny enough to notice that he's been asked about the important people in his life, the ones he loves. In the end, who else is left on that list, but Lyanna Stark?

So he describes her, how he was first interested by Ned's description of her. He built up this romantic idea of the Northern Woman, a woman who was tough enough to outlast winters, who could fight with shield and sword, who was no nonsense and strong enough to keep up with him. He liked Southron women just fine, but he certainly had no patience with courtly manners and poets and songs and the like. Rather like Stannis, actually. Hah, yet another thing they had in common besides beastly tempers! He decides that any sister of good old Ned would be good enough for him and writes with a betrothal offer to her father.

He has an opportunity to meet her formally at one of Ned's nameday feasts held in the Eyrie and he is enchanted. She was beautiful, so very beautiful and she is exactly as Ned described; she rode like she was born to ride and looked him in the eye instead of acting demure. He invites her hunting and to his joy she accepts readily. They match pace easily and every jump he takes she takes also; she is fearless. They spend a blissful week hunting and hawking. When she must leave to go back to Winterfell, he is sure that he has never felt more yearning. He starts to write her letters, having no talent at it before, he actually starts to worry about his rough ways and the stumbling of his words, but Ned assures him that he is doing well.

And finally, he winds up with his dances with her in Harrenhal. He looks at Selyse and gives her a wan smile; surely with her steel trap of a mind, she remembers too. It was the last time he would ever see Lyanna. Before Rhaegar stole her. He takes deep breaths; he knows that Selyse has no patience should he begin ranting.

“Robert,” Selyse finally, slowly says. “It has been years. And yet, I sense that you have not finished mourning her.”

“No,” Robert huffs. “I have not. She is the only woman I will ever love.”

“Of course. But you have also not had a chance to bid her a final farewell.”

“Why should I?”

Selyse pauses.

“I think that perhaps because your parents were taken from you so early, so suddenly, and then the same thing happening with your betrothed, that you do not know how to let go.”

Robert snorts.

“I know she's dead! I go my days not thinking about it, and then sometimes I'm riding my horse and I remember riding in the woods with her and it hurts me all over again! I'll never forget!”

“I’m not saying you should forget. But this pain, this hurt, this does you no good, Robert. You need to let go. You said so yourself once. You didn’t understand how Stannis can brood and remember to stoke his anger the way he does. And yet, you cling to your sadness. You do the same thing, with different emotions. If you took the time to say goodbye, you could begin to heal. Do not forget her. But let your sadness go.”

Robert’s fists clenched and his jaw jutted, just like Stannis’ did before a teeth grinding. But finally, he nodded.

“Now, then. Shall we try? Will you say your final farewell to Lyanna? Do it, so that you have no unspoken words left for her ears?”

“Very well,” Robert growled.

“Close your eyes.”

Robert did.

“When was the last time you saw her?”

“Harrenhal.”

“Then let it not be Harrenhal. Think back. Back to the Eyrie. The woods. Is she on horseback?”

“Yes. Yes, she has to be.”

“She has her traveling cloak on? Her saddlebags packed?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember everything of her?”

“Yes.”

“Now. You cannot go with her on this journey. Tell her what you never had a chance to before. Tell her how much you love her. Give her all your love for her journey. Can you do that?”

Selyse is not sure if it would work. But a great dam has burst and Robert starts to talk, a rapid disjointed pleading to not go. He praises Lyanna, he mentions all the hunting and hawking, the letters-

He bursts into tears and makes big ugly sobs in the middle of this, his chest heaving and his hands scrubbing at his eyes like a child.

He laments having never kissed her, how he treasured the times he was allowed to hold her hand while dancing, how he was so happy to sit beside her during the feasting at the Eyrie. He confesses how he was going to try to grow Winter Roses for her in a garden in Storm’s End no matter that Cressen said they wouldn’t grow, how he would be glad to name a son

Eddard after her favorite brother, and Brandon and Benjen besides, and that he will never forget her, no, he will miss her all his days.

He trailed off, sniffing.

“Robert?”

“What.”

“Will you say farewell?”

Robert makes a shaky breath and waves one hand, eyes still closed.

“What do you see?”

“She’s going. She’s going. She’s kicked her horse to a gallop and she looks- She looks beautiful and happy and-”

He sobs anew.

“Farewell,” he gasps. “Farewell my love!”

Selyse reaches out and tentatively pats Robert’s hand. He grips her hand with both of his and squeezes once, hard enough to make her wince, before he opens his eyes.

“Well,” he clears his throat loudly, pulling his handkerchief from his sleeve and wiping at his eyes and nose. “Well.”

Selyse glances at Megga and Ser Barristan. She’s not unaffected herself; she hadn’t been expecting Robert to react like that, but his sorrow was as explosive as his anger. She has to wipe her eyes. Megga has crumpled her own handkerchief to her face, making ugly snorting noises. Ser Barristan has a very severe frown of discomfort and sympathy from witnessing the King’s crying.

They sit for a time and don’t say a word.

“I think I feel better,” Robert finally says.

“Do you?”

Robert makes a bobbling motion of his head.

“I just wonder what I should do when I feel sad again.”

Instead of drinking, of course.

“You could visit this godswood. I think she would have liked the Red Keep’s godswood.”

“... Yes, she would. It’s not a proper godswood though. Hasn’t got a weirwood. Ned said that was the most important part and it’s missing. He was unhappy about how the Eyrie’s godswood isn’t right too.”

“... Perhaps you could plant a seedling from the weirwood in Storm’s End? Dedicate it to her?”

Robert nods decisively this time.

“Good idea. Good idea. I’ll make the order.”

He sighs and blows his nose.

“I don’t think I want to talk about anybody else,” Robert says.

“One more thing, though. How are you getting on with Cersei?”

Robert laughs and makes a comical exaggerated leer.

“You said I should pay attention to her because she craves attention like a mummer craves applause. Well, I can stand her best while bedding her, if you excuse my crudeness! And that is going very well! Hah!”

Selyse tilted her head with approval. It was a difficult undertaking, attempting to get the better of Cersei; woman was obsessed with her brother and unhinged from the start. From the time she murdered Melara Hetherspoon. Fortunately (or unfortunately) Robert Baratheon loved a challenge. He was a hunter at heart. And once he was convinced (by Selyse’s adroit shitstirring) that Cersei was interesting quarry, the equivalent of big game in a skirt, it was on like Donkey Kong. She wasn’t nice. In fact, she’s a lousy, vile, bitch. But when Selyse told Robert to consider what it meant to be a daughter of Lord Tywin Lannister, dread homicidal maniac, ender of Houses, drinker of wine out of cups made from the skulls of his enemies, Robert got the implication Selyse aimed for. With a father like Lord Tywin, how could his wife be anything except a whirlwind of pride and ill temper? He could not hope that she would turn out better. She could only be managed and endured. Robert now took Cersei’s temper tantrums and insults as a regular occurrence like bad weather. All it took was a change in perspective; was he or wasn’t he a Stormlands man? Wasn’t he of a people who had heightened emotions and rampant stubbornness and lived their days *con fuoco*? Cersei may be more sharp-tongued than a usual Stormlands woman, but she couldn’t howl and storm any harder than one! Hah!

“She’s at a fine gale and drizzle this day!” he’d cheerfully joke at Stannis during a dinner, wagging his eyebrows.

He’d guffaw at Stannis’ inevitable uncomfortable grimace.

How prudish his brother was, when everybody knew he and Selyse were like a pair of alley cats in heat! Hah!

He would pester Cersei like an overly enthusiastic golden retriever, give her over the top compliments to placate her vanity, tickle her until she screeched, all on top of having a robust sex life. He had ideas, most nobility did, of what it meant to have a wife. And what it meant to have a mistress. Stannis, of all people, was the one to broach the groundbreaking idea that he was perfectly satisfied with Selyse as a wife whom he treated like how he imagined other

men treated a mistress. What he meant was being more demonstrative with affection and enjoying each other's company. What Robert took that to mean was that he ought to be kinkier with Cersei.

Given Robert's propensity for overshare, Stannis was glad that Selyse was willing to sit through Robert's talking on the subject. He was unaffected about the idea of his brother discussing his sex life with Selyse; he saw the benefits of a royal couple not at each others' throats in public. He also trusted in Selyse. She simply was unimpressed by his brother. She simply was satisfied with their marriage. He was good enough for her.

So yes. Feathers. Gags. Blindfolds. Dripping hot wax. Safewords. Robert was going to dom Cersei into putty.

"Have you given any thought to why she may be unhappy with you, like I asked weeks ago?"

Robert cleared his throat.

"I think I... when we married. During the bedding. I. Uh. I was in my cups and now I know I was hating it all, hating that I was marrying her instead of-"

Robert stopped. He huffed.

"I called her Lyanna."

"Oh, Robert."

"I know," Robert looked down. "I made her hate me. Stupid Idiot Lump, like she calls me."

"Has there been more, Robert?"

"I, uh. I haven't been kind. Or gentle with her. When I past bedded her while drunk. She told me so and I don't want to admit it, so she smashed her drinking horn in my face."

Robert opened his mouth and pointed at a chipped tooth.

"That. I let her hit me without trying to duck because I knew I was in the wrong and then I just went off whoring. Never apologized or anything."

"You should. And not right before you bed her, either. Apologize for your drinking and shaming her in front of the court. She did not marry you expecting such treatment and she is a daughter of a Great House. You owe her that. You haven't been getting too drunk, I've noticed."

Robert nodded.

"I wouldn't go into battle drunk. And this marriage to that woman is like a battle. So I need to keep a clearer head. I'll be better at the business of being her husband. Got to keep old Tywin off my back. She didn't want to marry me, either. She was for Rhaegar, you know?"

"It was no secret, Lord Tywin's ambitions."

“Well. Guess that fucker Rhaeger fucked me over one other way by making me kill him so I’d have to marry the woman he might’ve married. Hah!”

“You said it.”

“Good talk. Well. I’ll be going now.”

“Have a good day, Your Grace.”

Robert nodded, stood up and strode off with Ser Barristan.

“My lady?”

“Yes, Megga?”

“That was so sad!”

Selyse stares in the direction that the King and Ser Barristan went, her pale eyes calm. And thinking.

“It is. That was very sad. Let’s get back to the Foxhole, shall we?”

King's Landing: Plans Upon Plans

That evening, when they retire to their chamber, (they don't keep separate chambers, though there is room enough in the Foxhole. Stannis wants to stay close to his wife and he is more than willing to take an unconventional stance on a matter that absolutely nobody else had any business knowing about openly) Stannis only manages to shrug his jacket off before Selyse is on him, kissing him deeply, her hands grasping him tightly.

"I reckon I love you," she says, pulling back.

"You reckon?" Stannis raises an eyebrow.

"Well. It's an emotion. I'm not that good with them, you've noticed."

"Well, then," Stannis kisses her, his tone gaining a droll shade. "I reckon. That I love you too."

Selyse grins in the bright happy way of hers and they tumble backwards onto the bed.

"Want what you missed from lunch?" she murmurs.

"Yes."

They undress all the way and he lies on his back, with her rubbing and rocking on top of him as they kiss. She works her way down as Stannis puts his hands through the waiting loops of cord that are secured to the posts of the headboard, hidden under the pillow. She licks long wet stripes up and down his cock and he turns his head to the side, trying to bury his moans. He can't believe he'd actually argued against it the first time she suggested. It was entirely shocking; he'd heard that it was something whores did and she was his lady wife! But Selyse was a vixen in all the right ways and he really couldn't maintain his perfunctory resistance (he was curious!) with the way she licked her lips and kissed and nipped her way downwards, catching him unprepared that first time, still half-thinking that it was one of her deadpan jests. She slides the cockhead in and starts slavering and slurping. It's obscene. He shouldn't like to watch but he does from the corner of his eye. He fights against the impulse as usual but he really can't hold against her determined sucking.

"Selyse- Yes- Fuck-!"

He wants to be quiet. It's ridiculous, but ever since they've started in his office, he finds that it's somehow better, more freeing, more honest (and he does prefer honesty) to let her know how pleased he is when she pleases him. So he says the first things on his mind, before he has time to be embarrassed and as she always encourages him by being even more enthusiastic when he gives voice to his pleasure, he's become undone and unencumbered by concerns of being noisy.

His cock gives a warning twitch and she lifts off, denying him. He yells from the frustration of it, hips pumping in the air, before he falls back onto the mattress. He swallows, licking his

lips, silent again as she puts her hand on him. After all that rapid bobbing and sucking from before, to have her finally touch him again is its own pleasure. She keeps her hand almost still, her thumb leisurely circling his cockhead, spreading the leaking precome into his skin. He hisses with appreciation when she leans forward and slowly laps at his nipples. She doesn't speed up and it's not enough, not- He can't stop his thighs from shaking, his hips jerking in an attempt for more and she only loosens her grip until she's barely holding him.

He breathes deep and forces his hips still.

The moment he does, she begins jerking him off, building up speed just as he likes it-

"I'm going- I'm going to come-"

She lets go again.

Stannis snarls at her, straining at the ropes holding him down, his body arching with frustration.

She waits, until he is still again. She licks and sucks him slowly this time, and when he can't help crying out again, she lets go.

They have more time, unlike for lunch. She can kiss wherever she likes, she can draw out sensation with scratches of her nails, the petting and massaging of her palms, with licks and nibbles of her teeth at his throat, his nipples, his hips, she can ignore his hardness or she can grip it and suck and bob, making him cry out, making him yell and howl. Once, he thought he wouldn't be like other men, he'd keep his mouth shut during marital duties, he wouldn't be some grunting animal. He didn't know the pleasure from the rare moments of touching himself would pale in comparison to Selyse's play.

His body is shaking without his say so and he rides a crest of pleasure. He craves this part, this curious sensation of spending, only he hasn't, really. He really had no idea his body was capable of such a thing. She waits out his quaking.

"You look so good like that," she cooed. "My handsome lusty Stanny Blue Eyes."

Stannis can't help smiling at her.

She taps his arm and that is the signal that allows him to free his hands from underneath the pillow and pull her to him, flipping her over, kissing her. He strokes his fingers into her, he loves feeling how wet she is, and works her further open for him before sliding in. He can't go slow, not after she works him up so much, and they crash into each other, gasping and groaning, her hands stinging scratches down his back. He yells out one last time when that bolt of pleasure strikes him after the denial and it's stronger, the built up explosion that comes from holding off and it's like it took the top of his head off and he's floating outside of his body, looking down on himself.

He withdraws and slips down so that he can lick and stroke at her with his fingers until she comes too, her strong thighs flexing around him.

They rest, lying where they have fallen, with Stannis' head resting on one of her thighs. He sleepily regards her quim from his angle and thinks that there just might be something to the tales of men going to war over exceptionally beautiful women. As his head clears, he concludes they are still idiots. But he understands the impulse. He shakes himself and moves so that he is properly lying next to Selyse.

"What did you speak of during lunch?" he asks.

"Robert's memories of Lyanna Stark."

"Ah."

Stannis' lip curled with undiluted disdain.

"Well, now," Selyse pets his arm.

"I still think he's been an idiot," Stannis declares. "He takes duty and vows too lightly and I don't think he actually loved her so much at all, with the way he's fornicated his way through the Vale and the Stormlands."

"People like Robert can manage to feel," Selyse encircles the air with her hands. "While at the same time thinking that sex is outside-" she makes another, separate circle in the air. "Of emotion. It is merely a physical sensation and not the same as love."

"That's wrong," Stannis replies. "What's the use of falling in love if people will not be constant? I would never knowingly, willingly, go against my vows to you. And I love you, at that. Duty is not easy, most of the time, but it is so easy, to stay true to you."

Selyse tilts her head as she looks at Stannis, a smile quirking at her lips.

"I'm so lucky to be with somebody like you," she finally says.

Stannis ducks his head down against a pillow, momentarily unable to meet her gaze, overwhelmed by the welling up of feelings.

It's true, though. For him, the idea that anybody else, some bed slave trained at the most prestigious whorehouse in Lys, for example, could make him feel as good as Selyse is an impossibility. Perhaps they could handle his cock and play such games, but he doesn't want them- He wants Selyse. He trusts her. She never laughs at him, she doesn't look at him as second-best. He is the best, in her eyes, and that's something no common whore can possibly do. They could compliment him, he's heard that is something one can demand of whores, that they lie to you (Why. Just. Why) but it's so much better from Selyse. It's real. Why would he ever go from the sublimity of being with Selyse to some stranger? Selyse can explain all she likes, but Stannis isn't sorry that he simply doesn't understand this aspect of Robert and other people.

Selyse kisses his cheek, before they moved to get under the covers. Stannis has become very accustomed to this; their legs entangled, her head propped on his shoulder. He has his hands at her buttocks. He was quite embarrassed about his lack of control over the matter, yet he

could not help himself; it was just so pleasing to be free to hold her there, to squeeze every so often. She reciprocated of course. He didn't mind her self-satisfied chuckles as she reached over with one hand and squeezed him back. Why should he? Sometimes, if they kept up with the touching, the spark would reignite and they would couple again. He liked that immensely.

"Are you very sure that Lord Greyjoy will rebel?"

"We have a saying in Brightwater Keep. Follow the money."

Stannis was silent for a time.

"Why is it that Varys cannot give better intelligence?"

"The Ironmen are very insular. There could be any number of indigents that can be bought if they have debts or very fallen into drink or gambling, but if they are in so desperate straits, then you cannot expect that they are trusted by other Ironmen or that they can be placed to usefully pick up talk of plans. So the easiest way of infiltrating is out. The same distrust of outsiders makes the planting of agents similarly difficult. And then there is Varys' usual agents being particularly vulnerable."

"The mute children," Stannis growls.

"Yes. I expect the Iron Islands are not a place where the sight of children freely running and playing in the streets is common. They would still be too conspicuous."

"Despite that, you do not trust Varys."

"He's got his own angle."

"And what would that be?"

"Not entirely sure yet. We'll see how the dice falls. If he's truly a pragmatic idealist about good governance, he may stay. If he's actually an opportunistic agent of Essosi pretenders--"

"Blackfyres, really?"

"Everybody wants to rule the world," Selyse sings to him.

"Except you."

"Can you imagine my face stamped on coins? Ghastly."

Stannis nuzzles her nose in a fit of sentiment.

"A fine, distinctive profile."

"Look at you, using flattery," Selyse looks surprised and pleased.

He is not graceful with his words, they both know it. But every so often, he manages and she is gratifyingly receptive.

“So we wait on the Ironmen to prove your prediction.”

“Yes. The more time they give us, the more power we can bring to bear and when we do, we must not falter.”

“You insist on Balon Greyjoy’s death.”

“I say you don’t give chances for dumb fuckers to get back up and stab you in the back. A fleet of what, a hundred, against the rest of the Seven Kingdoms? That’s being so dumb it’s almost impressive. Can’t let the audacious moron live. Robert is actually prone towards mercy. Doesn’t want to emulate Lord Lannister. It’s admirable of him, actually. But not with backstabbing assholes like Balon Greyjoy. We’ll sort things out after the fight, see to the surviving Greyjoys.”

Stannis raises an eyebrow; these bouts of profanity from his wife are disconcerting, but he has heard worse from her brothers and male cousins in the yard. He assumes Lord Florent has been lax on the matter and that of course his lady wife would pick up vulgarity as an amusement. So long as she maintains decorum in public (and she strenuously does) he will not move to correct her.

“You don’t think any of them are fit to rule.”

“Not if they want to go back to piracy. If there’s none fit, have Lord Harlaw rule. He’s reasonable, of good repute and even literate.”

Stannis nodded, before settling fully back into his pillow.

“Shall you inform Robert of this decision of state, or shall I?”

“I think we need to have Lord Arryn have first round with him before I enter the arena.”

“Very well. Sleep well.”

“Sleep well.”

During the subsequent moons, Stannis would hear during dinners in the Foxhole that the Florent goal to form a wool and cotton monopoly was now a reality, due to the implementation of the spinning frame and flying shuttle. Ambitious dyers were leasing land close to the mills to build and set up dyeworks and paying fees to access the barrels of urine from King’s Landing for use as mordants. Already, gingham and striped fabrics were coming out of the Florent mills. Lord Florent had the cash to begin expanding his mills and the speed at which his mills were processing cotton and wool were such that subsidiary businesses could be spun off from the raw cotton; the papermakers of Old Town were free to experiment on pulp mixes of cotton, producing finer sheets of paper at greater amounts.

Lord Florent spoke with Stannis and Renly, suggesting that Storm’s End would benefit from its own wool mills, since sheep were raised in abundance by the Stormlanders. Renly, though just eleven years old, listened seriously, wanting to be responsible as a Lord, impressed by

Lord Florent and Alekyne. He depended on Stannis' advice on the matter, though it made perfect sense to him. The Foxhole needed money to pay for the rounds of experiments and research. The Florents got a lot of money from their mills. So he ought to have some mills of his own. He also ought to have better quality roads so that the wool trade could prosper on his behalf. His smallfolk farmers ought to have better yields by being able to borrow farming equipment owned by Storm's End itself that Alekyne developed, or for some of his vassals to buy and own outright. With less need for farmhands, extra smallfolk could be hired on at the mills. He spoke of it to Stannis, after listening in on the discussions that Imry and Alekyne had in the Foxhole. When Stannis nodded in approval, it made Renly very proud indeed, because it was so difficult to have Stannis approve of anything.

He still occasionally had nightmares of the food running all the way out during the Siege, of Ser Davos failing to sail in, and of Stannis resorting to ordering everybody to eat of manflesh, like those cannibals you heard of on Skagos. He once thought to himself that he hated Stannis for being so pigheaded stubborn, after all, they were noble, weren't they, they'd be ransomed if only Stannis would surrender. But after he met the Florents and he heard them spin the tale of Fantastic Mr. Fox, he resolved to never, not ever, surrender, not if he could help it. The Fox Family would not be rooted out of their home, they were besieged and they dug in, they endured, and yes, it was by Mr. Fox's cunning that they survived, but Renly did not forget that Mr. and Mrs. Fox would have killed the Little Foxes themselves out of mercy as last resort than to let their poor cubs be slaughtered by the Farmers. Renly had been shocked by the idea, but of course, wild animals did not hold to fearing kinslaying, did they? So in the end, Stannis was just as good as the Fox Family and really, Renly was lucky that he was as stubborn as that. It was just a pity that they couldn't have somehow dug some tunnels out from under Storm's End and brought mischief to the Tyrells back then, as the Foxes would have done.

Only now did Renly comprehend how lenient Robert was and why Stannis hated the Tyrells so; even the Florents agreed that Lord Mace ought to have paid somehow, one of his many sons sent to the Wall, at the least! Renly will show him, he'd show every other Lord Paramount that he was worthy. He was of blood with the Storm Kings of old and he'll not have anybody underestimating him for being a third son. Not some comfortable, fat, fool, who had not even the gumption to attack a castle outright. Renly got the idea that Stannis would not have minded so much dying from catapult fire; at least it was proper combat. Robert thought so too. Renly supposed it was the correct way of it. If you aimed to win by arms, then use those arms, don't just sit about!

There was no question that Alekyne was a strong heir to Brightwater Keep. And yet, as shown by Imry and Erren's own father's death by riding accident or what happened to Robert's friend Ned Stark, who could tell what might happen in the future. Imry and Erren were being taught Brightwater Keep's business just in case. Renly thinks that in the end it was a lucky thing that his parents managed to have him at all before dying. Houses rise and fall by their children. He wrinkles his nose, considering that he must wed and father children. Best not think about it yet. He's still young. He'll have time.

He knew now from hearing Stannis and Selyse's conversations that she was just as well an administrator and that Melessa Tarly ran Horn Hill and Horn Hill's mills while Lord Tarly spent his days training his men-at-arms and knights or patrolling his land's borders. The

Florents believed that every noble ought to have the education to rise to the duty of overseeing a holding, just in case. The same would happen with Omer and Merrell, though the older Florents thought they were still young, yet. Renly didn't have that luxury; he would have to take the reins at sixteen! And not just Storm's End, he was Lord Paramount; other lords would come to him to make ruling on their disputes with each other and such things! He worried about being ready, though he was a little reassured that he would always have the good advice of the Florents and Stannis. Even Lord Arryn, though Renly was a little tongue-tied around the very important Lord Hand. He knows by now that he would have no good advice from Robert! He's seen how Lord Arryn and Stannis and even Selyse have to prod him around like a stubborn ox. Stannis agreed to write to Great-Uncle Harbert to work with the staff the Florents would send over to oversee the construction of new mills and improving the roads on Storm's End land and the training up of Storm's End smallfolk for the work.

Renly even sat down with Stannis to read Great-Uncle Harbert's raven messages about the state of Storm's End's treasury and other concerns. It shocked him to find out that the Florents had over four times the entire income of Storm's End and they were a vassal House. Is the entire Stormlands so... so poor? Stannis mentioned that wealth wasn't the sole worth of any House, which may be true, but Renly knew that money paid for all sorts of things. The Stormlands is rightly proud of the might of their knights, but how much better they could be, with better, more expensive breeds of horse, better steel for their armor and weapons, better everything? If only they could afford it! Renly asked if the Florents were as rich as the Tyrells. Stannis frowned and shrugged. So Renly went to ask Alekyne. And Alekyne went to ask his Uncle Axell who worked under the Master of Coin. Alekyne told Renly to swear never to tell anybody, not even Stannis this, because the doings of the Royal Treasury were realm secrets, but of course, Florents loved to find out secrets. Renly clasped his hands over his mouth and nodded. Alekyne leaned down and whispered to him that the Florents would catch up to the Tyrells in less than ten years.

Ten years seems like such a long time to him; why that was almost his entire life so far! But Alekyne laughed and said that the Tyrells had been richer than the Florents since being rewarded High Garden by King Aegon I. And that was over two hundred years ago! And they only started to really get more money because of Selyse's ideas from when she was fourteen. Renly frowned, intimidated by the thought that he might never get any wonderful ideas like Selyse or Rhea or Melessa or Alekyne or Imry. Even Erren was going to discover something; it was only a matter of time with his own workshop on Dragonstone! Renly was starting to regret that he never minded Maester Cressen's lessons as he should, if he was going to be left behind like that! Or, Renly bit his lip, perhaps Baratheons weren't meant to keep up with people like Florents, who were so crafty and creative, who asked impossible questions and yet managed to find so-called impossible answers? Was he just too... slow? It was a momentarily suffocating feeling.

Alekyne patted his shoulder reassuringly and said that perhaps he might or might not. But he was smart enough to know to put any good ideas to use instead of being a stubborn doubter like Lord Hoster Tully, wasn't he? Renly straightened and nodded his head firmly. Then, Alekyne continued, as long as he tried his best to make things better and didn't abuse his smallfolk, didn't force his vassals to go against their honor while at the same time not allowing them to run roughshod over him, and wasn't a violent madman asshole, like King

Aerys or even a plain asshole like Lord Tarly, he was sure to be a good Lord Paramount. Renly laughed and agreed that he wasn't going to be the asshole.

His happy, carefree days of playing ended when just as Selyse predicted, the Iron Islands declared war. Lord Balon Greyjoy turned away the royal envoy sent by Lord Arryn. They raided the coast of the Riverlands with impunity because Lord Hoster Tully did not have the ability to order his coastal vassals to put up semaphore towers the way Lord Tywin Lannister could. Upon the first signals from Banefort of a raid, Lord Tywin was ready. Westerlands knights were already told in advance that should they see any signal towers messaging with signs of being attacked, they could mass and take any Ironmen pirates they wished with impunity. Freeriders were patrolling already up and down the coast and the Ironmen raiding parties who dared the Westerlands coast found themselves expected, ambushed, and their ships burned while beached. It was imperative that no news reach Pyke of these failed raids.

Iron Islands: Handling the Greyjoy Rebellion

Ravens and semaphore messages sped onward to King's Landing. Robert immediately ordered banners to be raised and began marching with a contingent of five hundred Gold Cloaks, picking up Crownlands banners as he went on the Gold Road, planning to rendezvous at Lannisport. Stannis set sail immediately, taking the Royal Fleet with him. Renly was sorely afraid, as both his brothers were gone and not only that, but Alekyne, Ser Colin Florent, and even Erren were going to battle. Nobody had heard from Imry for moons and he was probably making way to muster at Old Town or Lannisport if he was in a place that had criers who could repeat and spread raven messages of emergency. Kind Ser Davos was gone as well!

He had no choice but to stay in the Foxhole, sitting with Selyse and the ladies and trying to distract himself with studies or reading. She was obviously pregnant now and looked fit to burst. It was almost as bad as the siege, though he was definitely not starving. What if his brothers died? What if Selyse died giving birth? Everything was uncertain and awful. Omer and Merrell were most comforting companions during this time; they would go all together to hide underneath a bed in one of the bed chambers, crammed in tightly like peas in a pod, holding hands. For they worried over their father and all their older kin, of course. Maester Willis was a little exasperated about having to seek them out instead of being able to expect them showing up in a timely fashion in the classroom, but he was a good, sympathetic man, and did not scold them for making him investigate any number of beds every morning after breakfasts by poking about underneath with a broom.

In the meantime, Lord Tywin sprang another trap on the Iron Fleet. Though the Lannister fleet was anchored at Lannisport, the crews were ordered to remain berthed onboard and to maintain watch; captains were to arrange shifts where no more than one quarter of the crew were ashore at any time, starting from Lord Tywin's return from the Master of Ships' wedding. There was grumbling of course, but nobody would gainsay Lord Lannister. When Victarion Greyjoy tossed the first torch onto Lord Tywin's flagship, it was doused quickly while horns sounded. Bells began ringing from Lannisport. Victarion's ship was quickly targeted by archers and scorpions. The formerly quiescent ships of the Lannister fleet raised anchor and began a counterattack. The raiders who were sent to attack Lannisport directly were engaged by the city guard. Luckier, cannier captains of the Iron Fleet were able to slip out of Lannisport. The same could not be said of Victarion, who took a scorpion bolt to the chest.

The attack on Seaguard went just as badly. Lord Mallister successfully repelled the Ironmen reavers and sent off ravens, and coastal Northern Houses were already mustering, alerted by their own system of semaphore towers. Lord Stark got early enough warning that by the time a raven arrived from King's Landing, he and his banners were well ready to set out.

Stannis made unprecedented time, his fleet doubling the Dornish peninsula and joining up with the Redwyne fleet and Old Town warships weeks ahead of them expecting him. He saw that it was reasonable and necessary to have a war meeting to discuss the plan of attack with the new captains. While docked at Old Town, he is glad to see Imry along with Florent men-

at-arms. Erren quickly goes to greet his brother, who has browned from being out in the sun traveling and has also grown a moustache and beard. Stannis acknowledges Imry's bow with a nod but cannot speak with him at the moment; Lord Redwyne is at his side, introducing various captains and other lordlings.

He has seen the raised eyebrows and heard the impressed whistles of the other captains when they properly see the ships of the Royal Fleet at anchor; gleaming brass at the hulls, with many masts flying more sail. They needed fewer rowers and in the locations of the empty oar holes, a scorpion has been emplaced, near doubling effective power at range of each ship. He and the Royal Fleet captains field questions about their top speeds and how well they tack to the wind; all their answers cause more impressed looks and murmurs.

It becomes clear the Royal Fleet will be the tip of the spear; their improved speed and maneuverability will allow them to sight Ironmen ships first and engage. The older ships forming the Reach's armada will come from behind and prevent them from retreating. It is proven as they make their way to Lannisport, with the older ships following the coast and with the Royal Fleet swinging out into the open sea, forming a pincer capable of catching any ironmen raider ships they find.

By the time the Lannister fleet meets them near the Feastfires peninsula with Lord Tywin on his flagship, Stannis is confident that his captains know what's what. They can use signaling flags to good effect, they are familiar with how fast they can go in relation to each other, and they can pin a smaller raider ship between their broadsides before letting fly with volleys of scorpion bolts and arrows. Otherwise, to the jeering, roaring cheers of the crews, they can merely run the raiders asunder with ramming force, aided by the power of the wind.

The Iron Fleet makes its last stand at Fair Isle and Stannis could ask for no better performance of his fleet. They raced ahead and doubled Fair Isle from the north and trapped them while the Redwyne and Lannister fleets came to bear from the south. He knew that the smartest thing to do would be to run from such an unequal fight but Ironmen were foolhardy in their bravery and only the oldest of captains, who did not reach their age by mistaking idiocy for valor, were able to save their ships and crew by throwing up flags of surrender. The rest were torn apart by bolt and arrow or crushed by the larger Royal Fleet ships. This included Euron Greyjoy, who had managed to escape from Lannisport's failed attack but whose luck ran out when multiple captains of the Royal Fleet sighted the Silence's sails and gave chase, knowing that it was a Greyjoy flagship. They ran the Silence asunder.

The bulk of the fleet holds at Fair Isle while Stannis and some Royal Fleet ships return to Lannisport, escorting the surrendered Ironmen ships. There, they resupply the projectiles and receive King Robert and Lord Eddard Stark and all the rest of the fighting foot and knights mustered. The Ironmen captured are held prisoner within Casterly Rock, including Aeron Greyjoy.

From there the Royal Fleet splits off to their separate target objectives. Stannis is for Great Wyk. Ser Barristan to Old Wyk. Robert and Lord Stark are for Pyke directly. The Lannister and Redwyne fleet may pick and choose which targets they like, except for Harlaw island. Lord Rodrik Harlaw's more civilized, reasonable reputation is well known; he was sent a raven for an offer of parley from Lannisport and he replied that he is willing and waiting.

When they make landing at Pebbleton, the Royal Marines do Stannis proud; they form up quickly into shield walls, alert to potential attacks. The Florent forces do the same and Stannis thinks to himself; of course the Florents would have tested out the training and maneuvers they recommended that Robert use for the formation of the Royal Marines on their own men-at-arms. He sees Ser Colin Florent on his horse, joined by Imry and Erren on their own mounts, and they ride out ahead with the rest of the knights to challenge any Ironmen calvary (such as they manage to scrounge up) and serve as advance scouts. Alekyne remains with him to give orders to the Florent foot.

Stannis orders the horns sounded. He much prefers not having to slaughter smallfolk, especially since many must be thralls. They march and it is clear that Lord Balon was a fool who must have incited all fighting age men on his bid for rebellion, because scouts report that ever since the Fury dropped anchor and the troops were ferried to make landing, all that has happened are smallfolk barricading themselves inside their hovels or running to the hills. Stannis orders the horns to sound regularly as they march towards Pebbleton Tower.

They encounter a pathetic number of three dozen or so of House Merlyn bannermen arrayed at Pebbleton Tower's gate. He sees wooden peg legs and some have hooks instead of hands; old raiders who are no longer able-bodied seamen. Stannis has the Marine shield wall stop well out of the archer range of the Tower itself and they face off. Stannis shouts through the bullhorn.

There can be no question about who leads the forces arrayed against Lord Merlyn; Stannis is wearing a new set of steel plate armor from the Royal Steelworks. His helm is antlered like Robert's, but whereas Robert's newest helm now incorporated a crown along with a 12 point rack, the antlers on his were a more modest and practical 8 point rack. That was in addition to the unmissable yellow tabard with rearing black stag.

"Lord Merlyn! You have the choice to surrender or be overrun! Here you face the Royal Marines under the command of I, Stannis Baratheon, Lord of Dragonstone and Master of Ships! Choose wisely!"

"Two to one says we won't get a parley," Alekyne mutters to himself.

"Look at them," Stannis growls, incredulous. "Look at my Marines!"

"Pirates," Alekyne says in a singsong voice, as if Stannis should gain some meaning from it.

He's proven right when instead of any proper response from Pebbleton Tower, the Ironmen's own horns sounded. The Merlyn bannermen begin howling and charge at them, axes and hooks raised.

Alekyne was ready with the strangest (is that metal? Steel? With wheels?) bow Stannis has ever seen and shouts out to Florent archers to loose while he smoothly shoots down the one Ironman leading the charge. They only have time for one volley before the remaining few pirates crash into the Royal Marine shield wall. They get stabbed down by the halberds quickly. Cleanly. The shield wall reforms and backs up to their prior starting position.

Stannis orders the horns sounded again, a sharp double blast.

“Knock knock, motherfucker,” Alekyne snickers to himself.

Lord Merlyn himself looks over the parapet of one of the turrets like a very worried gopher. Stannis was about to shout through the bullhorn at him, but he pops out of sight again.

Within a reasonable amount of time before Stannis is pissed off enough to order the battering ram into position, the gates of Pebbleton Tower open.

Lord Merlyn walks out by himself, bearing a flag of surrender, which was probably originally a bedsheet to begin with, hastily tied to a broom. He makes a pitiful, brave figure.

Stannis rides up to him.

“Lord Baratheon.”

“Lord Merlyn.”

“... Pebbleton Tower is yours.”

Stannis makes a forward gesture with one hand to his Royal Marines and a detachment from the shield wall marches forward through the gates to take possession.

“If ravens were sent to the other keeps of Great Wyk, will they surrender?”

Lord Merlyn makes a tired gust of breath.

“We are Ironborn, my lord.”

“You didn’t want to do it, but the Lord Reaper commanded, correct?” Alekyne piped up, having ridden up behind Stannis.

“Aye,” Lord Merlyn says.

Stannis made an impatient glance at Alekyne, who had his notebook out and was writing.

“How many are staunch supporters of the Greyjoys on Great Wyk?” Stannis demanded.

“Half on one hand the Goodbrothers, half on the other,” Lord Merlyn replied. “The Sparr was eager. And nobody knows one way or another about The Farwynd. I don’t expect The Greyjoy expected him or his kin to show up. It doesn’t matter what we think. You’ll have to fight for all the keeps you wish to take. T’wouldn’t be right to give up without a fight.”

Stannis agrees that it was only to be expected. Stannis orders Lord Merlyn to go aboard the Fury and to wait, under guard.

They march, hitting all the keeps along the way. The daily jogging regime recommended by the Florents as part of the Marine training proves effective; they go for miles without lagging. Hammerhorn proves to be a place where the Royal Marines are properly blooded after a march, as Lord Goodbrother is savvy and wealthy enough to order a proper force to garrison his keep and with enough iron from his mines to have some actual iron and steel armor and

weapons for them. It is here that the knights made proper work of the garrison forces, breaking them with lance and sword, trampling them down with their mounts, before the Marines went on the move in tight formation, stabbing away with perfect efficiency and discipline. Stannis was occasionally distracted by the sight of Alekyne's curious wheeled bow; it did seem that his arrows flew farther and more true. He must ask about it, later. Lord Sparr's garrison was as pitiful as Lord Merlyn's though no less stubborn and prone to attacking first. Lord Farwynd's keep of Sealskin Point's gates were left wide open. That alone was suspicious enough to prevent them from entering. As they saw no longships in the harbor either, it was taken that the Lord had fled to sea. Possibly to his kin on Lonely Light.

He's safe there, as even the captured Ironmen lords say that there's no point in pursuit all the way to Lonely Light, where they would find nothing but a spit of rock and strange folk affected by sea madness. Seal-fuckers, they said in low, mocking tones.

They take all the Lords off Great Wyk and make for Pyke, before, as all the Florents advised Stannis, Robert can make a dumb mistake and displayed mercy. They hurry and succeed in dropping anchor in the smoking remains of Lordsport, taking their hostages ashore with them and march just in time to see that the curtain wall of Pyke has been breached and with men already streaming in. One entire tower of Pyke has collapsed from siege engine barrage and there is a large plume of dust and debris rising up from the bluff where it stood. It was a perfectly good view for further demoralizing the lords of Great Wyk. It was decided that they should stand ready should the main Baratheon forces through the curtain wall need additional support.

A squire rides up to Stannis, to inform him that as he's present, to bring up who he thinks he ought to the Great Hall of the Great Keep of Pyke, where they have captured Lord Balon Greyjoy alive. As nobody knows how Robert will decide, the hostages are left under guard and Stannis and the Florents make their way in.

They see Lord Balon Greyjoy standing with his hands tied. Robert is standing in front of the Seastone Chair. Beside him stands Ser Jaime and Lord Stark and he seems the same as he ever was. After his talks with Selyse, Stannis is not prone towards ill thought towards Eddard Stark any longer, only a persistent question as to why Robert should like him, with a reputation for dourness, over himself so much in their youth. What did Ned have that he did not?

"My Master of Ships!" Robert boomed out in his serious, King's Speechy Voice, as he's called it.

Lord Balon turns to sneer at him.

"Your Grace. Great Wyk is yours. I have captured all the Lords on the island and have brought them here, for your judgment."

Robert nodded.

"So you see," he speaks to Lord Balon. "Here is the man who crushed your Iron Fleet at Fair Isle. As I am the King who trained the Royal Marines and Gold Cloaks who have breached your walls and took you in your own Keep. You thought-"

Robert jabs his finger at Lord Balon.

“To pillage and plunder loyal subjects of the realm! You thought to attack a Lord Paramount, Warden of the West! You thought to make yourself a king! Hah!”

Robert stands up and strides forward, snatching the driftwood crown from Balon’s head, dropping it to the floor and stomping on it, snapping it to pieces with a loud crack.

“You declared yourself king! You rebelled yourself, Usurper!” Lord Balon snarled.

“It has been said: When you come for the king, you best not miss! Wise words, indeed! I smashed Rhaegar down and I wasn’t going to miss my swing when it came to Aerys himself! You? You missed your shot so badly, it’s not even in the same field.”

Robert made a sharp gesture, slicing his hand past one of his ears, while making an exaggerated whooshing sound between pursed lips. He walked around Lord Balon, still holding his warhammer.

“I have also been told, Robert Baratheon, not every problem can be solved by hitting it with your hammer! Well, that’s true. A hammer is not the right tool for every job.”

Robert finished the circle and stopped in front of Lord Balon.

“Not known for quick thinking, us Baratheons. But here it is: It’s not called the executioner’s sword for nothing. And that is the reward for high treason.”

He holds his hand out towards Ned.

“Lord Stark? The King wishes to borrow your weapon.”

Lord Stark hesitated for a moment before drawing out Ice.

“Your Grace,” he steps forward, to hold it out hilt first to Robert, who hands over his hammer.

“You all in this room are witness,” Robert steps away, testing the weight and balance of Ice with both hands. “For the crime of high treason, I, Robert of House Baratheon, First of My Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoyanar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, sentence you to die.”

And Robert swung. As large as Ice was, it was still much lighter than Robert was used to with his hammer. He was also used to aiming at the largest areas of mass with the heavy head of his hammer. The blade cleaved through the back of Balon’s head and detached Balon’s jaw bone entirely. The two pieces of his head bounced in different directions and his body tumbled over.

“Damn. He lowered his head at the last second,” Robert huffed.

He handed Lord Stark the sword back and got his hammer. He ordered some men to collect Balon’s head to show to the hostage Ironmen Lords. The body was consigned to whatever

death rites the Ironmen practiced. Ravens announcing the execution were sent off.

They rested for one night before clearing out and sailing for Harlaw, taking Alannys Greyjoy and her surviving children, Yara and Theon, and the hostage Lords.

Harlaw Island: Hammering Iron to Steel

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lord Rodrik Harlaw is waiting for them on the shore, with plates of bread and salt ready. As they may stay for a number of days discussing what's to be done with the Iron Islands, Stannis tells the captains of the Royal Fleet that were with him on Great Wyk to set out on patrol and inform the Redwyne and Lannister fleet and other associated warships, but to especially seek out Lord Tywin Lannister's flagship to inform him as quickly as possible, that Pyke has fallen, Lord Balon has lost his head, and they are to return to their home ports after capturing needed lords for leverage in negotiations. Important hostages were to be held all together within Casterly Rock's dungeons, their fates to be determined. As the King has plans for the Iron Islands, it is strongly ordered that further destruction of keeps and slaughter cease once surrender is clearly obtained. However, Stannis doesn't have much hope on that; given Lord Lannister's ways, he would expect Blacktyde, Orkmont, or Saltcliffe to be scoured, whichever one was unlucky enough to be chosen by Lord Lannister to vent his rage. His forces have too much experience from the Reynes and Tarbecks. The Greyjoy Rebellion is over. King Robert is to stay at Harlaw until such a time as what action to take about the Iron Islands are decided upon. Lord Tywin Lannister is invited as a Lord Paramount with grievances to the discussions regarding the future of the Iron Islands and to make his presence on Harlaw if he wishes.

Lord Harlaw's sister is given her old chambers and her children are allowed to stay with her. Poor Lanny has silent tears dripping constantly and she clutches at her remaining children, rocking and moaning. Rodrik swallows as he leaves her chambers and makes way to the Great Hall to take his place at the high seat. His sons. His two strong, poor boys. Lost to him in the Drowned God's Halls. It wasn't right, for children to pass before parents. He passes his hand over his eyes before straightening his shoulders and raising his chin and passing through the door. He must be strong for this. Harlaw House and Island depends upon him, the High Lord Captain.

King Robert of course has his place of honor at Rodrik's right hand. On Rodrik's left is Lord Stark, as a Lord Paramount. To King Robert's own right is space for Lord Lannister should he arrive. Lord Stannis is on Lord Stark's left, across from King Robert as Master of Ships and then the rest of their table is filled, to Rodrik's curiosity, with Florents. All of them. Rodrik also blinks when all of them and Lord Stannis take out notebooks and writing implements the likes of which he has never seen before. Thick metal styluses? But where are the ink pots? Curious.

"Right, then," Robert says. "The meeting for What The Fuck Was Balon Greyjoy's Problem has begun."

"Your Grace," Stannis growls.

"We'll come up with a more dignified name for the historians later. But the question still stands. What was Balon Greyjoy's problem? His father wasn't a dumb cunt like that, last I

knew,” Robert addressed Rodrik.

“Lord Quellon’s surviving sons believed in the Old Way, Your Grace.”

“What’s that?”

“The Iron Price. All things worth having are only worth having so long as they were taken by raiding and reaving. Lord Quellon wanted nothing to do with it. His sons saw him as weak. During your Rebellion, I heard tell Lord Quellon was unwilling to sail for any side, seeing as we never had much to do with greenlander business. His sons told him to raid so as not to lose out on plunder. He lost his life for the ambitions of his sons.”

“There a difference between the Old Way and piracy?” Robert asked.

“No,” Rodrik shook his head. “Ironborn who stood to gain under Balon’s leadership and with more than a little greed have decided that it is a thing that is in our blood. And not the practice of desperate sailors who have no useful purpose otherwise.”

“Now,” Robert scratches his chin. “I am of a mind to think that since I took off Balon’s head, this business is done and finished. But that is not so, as this pack of very knowledgeable fellows will tell you. So. I will let them say their piece.”

Robert then, to Rodrik and Lord Stark’s confusion, gets up from his chair and starts to walk a circuit around the room.

“Pay me no mind. I think and listen best on my feet.”

Rodrik looks at everybody else, confused at the irregularity. Lord Stannis’ expression is unsurprised and uninterested. The Florents similarly take no notice. Ser Jaime stands, consciously expressionless as usual while on duty.

Alekyne Florent introduces himself to Lord Rodrik before beginning.

“First of all, what would you say is the most pressing cause of piracy conducted by the Ironmen; customs and traditions or lack of resources? Do the Iron Islands suffer very often from famine, plagues, or other disasters?”

“Ironborn endure such ill fortunes and then they go reaving. The Islands make for precarious living and bad years force such action. A few do have the hot blood needed to reave for no reason. Mad killers who fear nobody and have nothing to lose, aye. That might be bred into certain family lines. I have not made a study of it. As of late, many Priests of the Drowned God have tried to gain favor from Lord Balon by preaching that to return to the Old Way is to return to greater favor from the Drowned God and that in turn means the rise of a stronger, better Iron Islands.”

“The ‘History of the Ironborn’ states that farming and mining is scorned as work fit only the lowest classes, the thralls. Is this true or outsider’s tales?”

“True for most. Maester Haereg is a respectable historian. I have found his account true to the stories I have heard from the better lore-tellers on these Islands.”

“So how do you maintain your holdings, Lord Harlaw?”

“Trade voyages,” Lord Harlaw replied easily. “and fishing. The mines. Harlaw is also the only island with fodder enough for breeding pit ponies. They are not fit for knights nor racing, but they are steady in temperament, strong for their size, surefooted, and hardy. They fetch good prices and if a winter is very harsh, they are not bad for eating.”

“What are the numbers of the bivalve colonies of the Iron Islands?”

“For food, you mean? I suppose when people get desperate enough Ironborn have resorted to eating those. I do not like such things myself. Chewy like tendon.”

“Not just food. Though for that, they are best with different preparation methods besides just boiling them. No, we suggest-”

Imry took out a box from his knapsack and passed it to Alekyne, who slid it over to Rodrik.

“A new industry specializing in desirable crafted goods that can only be got from the sea.”

Rodrik opened the box and there were examples of cameo carvings made out of mussel shells, mother of pearl earrings, necklaces, hair combs, and bracelets. As well as a string of pearls.

“Hmm,” Rodrik said, turning a larger cameo over to examine the back and how it is clear that it was made out of shell. “That can be possible. Make use of the shell and the meat. Makes sense. But would it be worth the trouble to trade?”

Robert stopped one of his circuits.

“If Queen Cersei, Lady Baratheon, and Lady Arryn show up in court decked out in seashell jewelry, you’ll have demand enough! Every lady wants to be in fashion.”

“And the pearls? I do not know that we have the oysters that yield pearls.”

“Then for the sake of the Iron Islands, the call for a hunt for pearl oyster colonies should be announced,” Alekyne suggested. “If there are oysters that produce pearls and you find out precisely what kinds, something surpassingly rare and therefore valuable will be of your holdings.”

Rodrik nodded.

“We do also believe- no. We know. We know that one can farm pearls.”

Rodrik blinked.

“Do you?”

Alekyne nodded eagerly.

“We’ve cut open pearls and examined them under magnifying glass lenses. It is clear that pearls are formed because sand or some other foreign debris gets stuck within the oyster and the response is to coat it with the natural substance that gives the pearl its luster. My cousin, Erren-”

Here, Erren stood and made a bow, grinning.

“Has found oysters on the island of Dragonstone and been jamming as varied objects as sand grains, glass beads, and pieces of other oyster shells into specimens to test. And here-”

Alekyne pulls out a different string of pearls from a pocket, smaller and some unattractively unevenly lumpy, but clearly pearls.

“Are some of the examples from just one year’s growth. Should one leave these farmed pearl oysters be, it is clear that larger, finer pearls fit for jewelry would be produced.”

He passes it to Rodrik. They watch as he turns the pearls over in his hand, feeling the smoothness of the pearls. He puts them to his teeth to test.

“Aye. Farmed pearls,” Rodrik looks up, quietly amazed. “What a time to be alive.”

“Do you believe that farming the creatures of the sea, like these bivalves, will be accepted by other Ironmen more than farming the land?”

Rodrik rubbed his chin. He could see how these Florents have been cleverly accommodating to the beliefs of the Ironborn. He also knew that they didn’t have to be; like King Robert, they could have washed their hands and left after the slaughter, left the Iron Islands to starve for another year or longer without fit men to bring back coin and goods from trading voyages and with fishing boats sorely short handed.

“It can be argued. Aye, I can certainly argue about the bounty of the Drowned God and how we’d be fools to ignore such gifts from the sea.”

“Excellent,” Alekyne grinned. “We can certainly assist in sending over craftsmen we trained in working with shells to you so that you can immediately begin training carvers for all the islands. As you have lost men... We would advise that the steady hands of women from sewing be encouraged to learn how to work the shells also.”

“Reasonable.”

“Now we may consider further inland-”

“Lord Tywin Lannister!” a guard announced.

“Well, he certainly hauled ass,” Erren muttered to himself, while Ser Colin shushed him.

Everybody stood to greet Lord Tywin as he walked into the room.

“Lord Tywin,” Robert grinned. “Had good hunting?”

“As well as can be expected,” Lord Tywin replied, taking the seat that Robert indicated for him. “You did not wait.”

Everybody took their seats, except for Robert. Robert smiled benignly, taking the brunt of Tywin’s displeasure over not holding up proceedings to wait for him. It was his prerogative as King to make it so and absolutely nobody was going to get him on his back foot over it.

“We figured out that Balon Greyjoy was a greedy cunt,” Robert ticked off his fingers. “Lord Harlaw has confirmed that piracy is practiced because the Ironmen are a desperate, starving folk, though some are also greedy cunts themselves. I’ll ignore the greedy cunts for the nonce and think on the desperate folk. These islands are bare; no good for farming. No meat or game enough to feed people. For the greater peace of the realm, the Florents have suggested and Lord Harlaw has agreed, that other sources of food and a new industry to produce valuable goods for trade be started and adopted by order of Lord Harlaw.”

“I do not recall agreeing to issuing an order nor that I could be obeyed. I said I may make arguments to the other lords,” Rodrik objected.

“I get ahead of myself,” Robert held up his hands, chuckling. “I have been advised that you, Lord Harlaw, as good-brother to the late Lord Balon Greyjoy, and a reasonable man who isn’t a greedy cunt, should be regent to your nephew Theon Greyjoy, heir to the Lord Paramountcy of the Iron Islands. Do you accept?”

“Aye,” Rodrik bowed his head. “I take on this responsibility and duty.”

“There,” Robert clapped Rodrik on the shoulder before continuing his circuit of the room. “We’ve caught up to what Lord Tywin has missed. Alekyne, go on.”

“We were about to discuss the state of the iron mines. Lord Harlaw, the practice of keeping thralls must end. In order to get thralls, they must be stolen from their lands. That must stop. Same thing with the taking of Salt Wives. Is that not reasonable?”

“I had not expected any demand otherwise,” Rodrik replied. “Will an order be made to return those who wish to the mainland?”

“We order it so,” Robert said as he walked past.

“That will cause unrest,” Rodrik warned.

“Which is why a rotating presence of the Royal Marines will be garrisoned at the Iron Islands,” Stannis said. “To maintain order and the King’s peace. Lands on key islands will be confiscated and placed directly under the Crown’s jurisdiction and governance for forts, barracks, and supply depots.”

Rodrik knew that the Iron Island lords will especially resent this, but they had made their decision to rebel, and this was the beginning of the price to be paid for their folly, so he nodded.

“Lord Lannister, it is here where we hope to have more of your involvement,” Alekyne respectfully addressed Tywin. “Is it fair to say that House Lannister are the best experts on mining in all of Westeros? With the best knowledge about the methods of pulling up more and better ore from mines, the best knowledge on how to prevent collapses and the like?”

“For thousands of years,” Lord Tywin replied.

Alekyne nodded to Robert, who spoke up.

“How would you respond to the idea of oversight over the mining operations of the Iron Islands? To have first pick of new veins opened, to have first pick of the ores produced? For a time period of perhaps up to fifty, but not less than ten years?”

“What of the existing mines?”

“As recompense for the attack on Lannisport, you would get the lion’s share of the proceeds from the sale of ores from those existing mines you improve, hah! The lords will get the rest of the proceeds from their holdings as they can traditionally expect, unless they get sent to the Wall. Now what say you to that?”

Rodrik could not avoid the slow swing of Lord Tywin’s head and the gleam of victory in his gaze.

“Acceptable.”

Here Rodrik felt a sinking in his heart, for now the Old Lion had his claws in the Iron Islands and he also knows that he was wroth over the audacity of attacking Lannisport. He will not do unto all of us what he did to the Reynes and Tarbecks, Rodrik desperately reassures himself. He has the mines to think of. He must preserve us, if he is to have us yield our iron. He must.

The Florents continued scribbling into their notebooks. Robert nodded at Alekyne to continue.

“The reputation of Ironmen as the great sailors of Westeros is not a false one. Lord Harlaw, you stated that you maintain your holdings through trade voyages, fishing, mining, and breeding of a specialized breed of pony. You will also institute new industries that will exclusively benefit the Iron Islands by producing desirable goods for trading. We would also offer you the ability to make trading the best choice of opportunity for the Iron Islands in another way.”

Here, Imry and Erren opened yet another, larger box that they brought in with them. They opened it and carefully took out a model ship and placed it in front of Lord Rodrik.

“I trust you have observed the Fury and the King Robert’s Hammer at dock?”

“Aye,” Rodrik was turning the model, leaning in to inspect it.

“Without the need to be crewed by fighting foot and with no dedicated rowers, these new trading ships will be the key to the Iron Islands’ recovery from Lord Balon’s bad decisions.”

Alekyne proceeded to lay out the advantages of these new ships who would practically fly, claiming an unprecedented 15 knots or better by wind alone using their taller masts with greater spread of sail. The model was narrow in hull and coolly elegant.

“I cannot believe such a ship can do what you claim it does,” Rodrik’s voice was flat. “She’ll capsize first hour out of port, her masts will shatter from the amount of sail.”

Left unsaid was the idea that no landlubbing greenlanders could properly build a ship.

“Her foremothers are the Fury and all the ships retrofitted for the Royal Fleet,” Alekyne replied. “The draft is deep and she’ll heel instead of capsizing. Ask the captains and crew that we have captured and are holding in Casterly Rock for what happened at Fair Isle. Our ships are faster, with half the number of rowers. That’s just with as much sail as we can safely retrofit to the broader and shallower builds of war galleys. With a ship built from the keel up for speed...”

Alekyne gestured emphatically at the model ship.

“Crewed properly and with good captains who know their business, this kind of ship will outrun storms and bring profits by carrying passengers, mail, spices, silk, and tea.”

“She’s not armed,” Rodrik reluctantly argued. “A sitting duck.”

“She’ll outrun everything else they can make in Essos. The most dangerous pirates were Ironmen. Now that Ironmen are to crew these ships, nobody can touch them. It is right that the sailors should defend the ships with axe and cutlass. The Royal Fleet is also vested in protecting the trading ships of the Seven Kingdoms, as well! The Royal Fleet will keep the trade lanes guarded!”

Rodrik sighed, turning the model, counting the extravagant spread of sail, up to five square sails on a single mast, with three masts.

“A beautiful dream, spun with pretty words. But the cost. It took five years after Balon ordered the building of the Iron Fleet for the warships to be completed. It’s now almost all sunk into the sea. We haven’t the ability to—” Rodrik pushed the model away. “Even with your ideas for seashell jewelry and farming for pearls, which would take years.”

“And that,” Alekyne spread his hands. “Is what the establishment of the Iron Islands Trading Company is for. Iron Island Houses would not need to individually attempt to build and crew these ships. Each ship can be built by pooled funds and the amount of profit is to be divided by proportion to the Houses, less the share for captain and crew.”

Rodrik was weakening. He shifted in his seat and put his fingers to his moustache.

“And to further reassure you that we trust in the design of these ships and the assumption of such risks, House Florent wishes to invest in each ship and cargo. Until your seashell and pearling industries become established, you can load up with cotton and wool goods produced by Florent holdings for trade in Essos.”

“House Baratheon will invest also,” Lord Stannis added. “At least, House Baratheon of Dragonstone and Storm’s End.”

“Hah. You think I don’t want in on this?” Robert called from across the room. “House Baratheon of King’s Landing will invest!”

“And House Tarly,” Imry piped up.

“And House Royce,” added Ser Colin. “Rhea has written.”

“Even House Arryn; Lady Lysa has been nagging Lord Jon about not being so reluctant about trade!” Erren raised his hand.

“Ned! Ned, you must join in!” Robert punched Ned’s arm after going to him with quick strides. “Afford to buy more glass panels to expand your glass houses. After all, Winter is Coming!”

Lord Stark blinked, not expecting to have much say.

“Well...”

“I will invest,” Lord Tywin said. “The Royal Fleet left the Redwyne and Lannister fleets behind. I saw how they maneuvered and their speed. My captains assured me that they have never seen ships so fleet. We need only build one ship of this kind to start, correct? Then we will see.”

“The proof will be in the pudding,” Alekyne nodded. “We do our utmost to not disappoint. One trade voyage, Essos and back.”

“The other Iron Island Lords must decide,” Rodrik finally said.

“I’m sure I can convince them,” Alekyne grinned.

“I’m sure you will, silver tongued as you are,” Rodrik replied. “When would this first ship begin construction?”

“After select Houses across the realm send a reply by raven to King’s Landing on how much they wish to invest and the resulting shares of cost of build out have been tallied to ensure fair deposition of profits from the maiden voyage? Immediately. All the required timber, canvas, rope, brass, and sundries are on standby at the Royal Shipyard on the Wendwater.”

“So soon?” Rodrik nearly reared back. “You’ve stockpiled an entire ship’s materials, waiting? You must be very sure that the Lords of the Iron Islands would say yes.”

Alekyne and the Florents all made varying insouciant shrugs and frankly shifty tilts of their heads.

“As the Iron Fleet would be decimated-” Alekyne began.

“There really isn’t any better choice is there-” Ser Colin added.

“If you all wanted to survive-” Erren put in.

“And avoid the Wall-” Imry quipped.

“You knew. You all knew what Balon was planning- How? For how long?” Rodrik’s voice rose, aghast.

“I was warned to expect an attack at Lannisport during the wedding feast of Lord and Lady Baratheon. Two years ago,” Lord Tywin stared at Rodrik with relish.

“We knew properly at least a year before that,” Erren piped up again, helpfully. “Merchants reporting taxes paid on the profits on timber, rope, canvas, and the usual shipbuilding materials sold to the Iron Islands, with writs of receipt from Pyke and all the major Iron Islands Houses. Even you, Lord Harlaw.”

Rodrik put a hand to his mouth, unconsciously trying to hide his gaping.

“Three years. Drowned God’s BALLS. The Royal Fleet’s improved ships, the speed of response-”

“I set sail on the day of the Lannisport attack,” Stannis said.

“And made it here, in less than a moon!?” Rodrik reared back. “From King’s Landing? You weren’t already patrolling by the Arbor?”

“Dragonstone.”

“Not a ship lost at the Stepstones or Shipbreaker Bay?”

“We went east of Tarth,” Stannis replied, starting to enjoy Rodrik’s goggling. “I admit it was risky to sail at night through the Stepstones, but I’ve had two years to chart out a course beforehand when the inevitable attack came.”

“Sailed at night!?”

Stannis made his own insouciant shrug.

“Drowned God’s big salty balls!” Rodrik closed his eyes, knocking his head backward into his high seat. “That’s some sailing.”

“Now think about what it would be like to build out a ship that does 15 knots to Essos,” Alekyne said. “With an experienced Royal Fleet navigator and the best charts from Royal Fleet use, for that particular ship!”

“... Best not,” Erren whispered to Imry. “His cock can get only so much more erect.”

Ser Colin elbowed Erren.

“House Stark will invest,” Ned finally said.

He did not understand half of all that nautical jargon, but watching Lord Harlaw's overawed response to Lord Stannis' replies was good enough for him. He didn't trust Lord Lannister's honor, but he did trust that the Old Lion knew what he was about when it came to gaining gold. And Robert was right; Winter is Coming. He ought to think on improving Winterfell's glass houses.

Chapter End Notes

Hello all!

I've made some Pinterest Boards to help visualize. I've also finally decided that if Lord Alester is Vincent Cassel-like, then Axell managed to grow into looking like a more or less 40 year old Gérard Depardieu by the time he was 20. Womp womp. Ser Colin is Micheal Wincott circa the 90's. I found him quite compelling in the "Three Musketeers" with Micheal Sheen, as Rochefort.

So: the Florent women are Gibson Girl from the necks up and a mash-up of 30's slinky to 50's vintage dresses and Chanel suit jackets from the neck down, with floor-length skirts. Broad skirts are worn only for riding and sport such as soccer (I haven't mentioned that the Florent ladies do play soccer). I would say that hats are up to individual taste; Selyse doesn't really go for the giant wedding cake-like picture hats that require so much anchoring with hatpins. She does enjoy veiling, though, as the fabric does soften her facial features. She's also more prone to a top hat shape with her hats because she embraces her height. The older Florent ladies like hats on the scale of Dowager Duchess Grantham from Downton Abbey. Lysa Arryn, on the other hand, LOVES cake-y broad hats and will cram as many fabric flowers and ribbons as possible; a more romantic sensibility. Between all of them, a fashion for millinery is also springing up in King's Landing.

The younger Florent men have taken after Captain Jack Sparrow; they care about a good hat too. Imry goes around with a French Cavalier model when he's not incognito. Alekyne rotates through that as well as top hats. Jackets are still colorfully (ASOIAF nobles do love their color) Napoleonic military in look, though there's a slow inclusion of plainer Regency styled jackets being added into their rotation; heavier embroidery and cording for capital-C Court appearances and less embellishment for going out hunting, other sport, or at-home wear. Pockets for everybody.

<https://www.pinterest.com/cathayshu/edwardian-gibson-girl/>
<https://www.pinterest.com/cathayshu/vintage-pinup-style/>
<https://www.pinterest.com/cathayshu/vintage-mens-style/>

Harlaw Island: Jaime Made to Explain it All

When Ned Stark entered the dining hall for dinner, there was only Robert and his brother Stannis, with Ser Jaime. Lord Tywin was already assured by Lord Harlaw and Alekyne Florent that the terms of House Lannister's new controlling interest in the Iron Island's mining operations would be laid out clearly in written form. Lord Harlaw agreed to wait until Kevan Lannister and other representatives of Lannister interests could come to the table for negotiations with the various Iron Island lords with significant mine holdings, which also meant waiting for the hostages within Casterly Rock's dungeons to be sorted out and transported, either back to the Iron Islands or sent to the Wall. Lord Tywin himself set sail for Lannisport with his fleet.

Alekyne spent even longer with Lord Harlaw talking to the hostage Lords, selling them on the ideas of House Florent for a better future for the Iron Islands. As the most major of Iron Islands Houses were of Pyke, Harlaw, and Greater Wyk, if he could convince them, practically all of the Iron Islands would be joining in on change.

"Is it just us?" Ned finally asked, taking a seat. The servants begin ladling out a fish stew. "Are the Florents still in talks with the Iron Island lords? Shouldn't you be there, Robert?"

"I am not useful during such talks," Robert said, tearing off hunks of black bread to dip into the stew. "I hit things with my hammer and yell at people to shut up if they start getting rowdy so that the clearer, cleverer heads can speak. They respect Lord Harlaw here; I wasn't going to undermine him in front of the other Iron Island lords."

Robert looked up and snorted at Ned's disappointed look.

"Ned, don't look at me like that. I did sit through the planning meetings on how to improve Iron Islander lives before Greyjoy made his move so that they all don't start getting dumb ideas of more piracy and rebellion five, ten years from now. I have been made to understand that ruling takes more attention than I've had before, if I don't want more rebellion. I have smart people working for me and Jon trusts them. And I also have Stannis to double check and tell me if I'm being an idiot."

Stannis grunted in agreement, slowly sipping on the stew. Ned supposed if Stannis was so quiescent that what Robert said must be true. Otherwise there'd be teeth-grinding and vehement protests about Robert exaggerating or shirking his duties.

"Then where are the Florents now?" Ned asked.

"All of them have invaded the Book Tower and Lord Rodrik is now their guide and hostage," Stannis replied. "If you properly met the lot of them, you'd understand. We'll likely not see any of them until the hour we set sail back."

"Hah! Great readers, all of them. And better, they think! That ship idea is all theirs!"

"They seem very knowledgeable," Ned nodded.

“Ned,” Robert put down his spoon. “Am I forgiven? For being a cruel, angry cunt?”

“Yes,” Ned said simply, smiling a little at Robert.

Robert beamed back and reached over to grip Ned’s shoulder; it wouldn’t do to slap it as usual while Ned was holding a spoon of hot stew that could spill everywhere.

“Good! And while I’m at it, Ser Jaime!”

“Your Grace?”

Ser Jaime was also eating, Robert having decided that as he fought hard and well during the breaching of the Pyke’s wall that he ought not be required to be on duty this dinner. Ser Mandon was on guard at this meal.

“When I named you Kingslayer. That was cruel of me to jape about it when I was, as I said to Greyjoy, going to go about killing Aerys myself and perhaps facing you on the way.”

“... As you say, Your Grace,” Jaime said after a surprised blink.

Ned took a sip of frankly poor ale in a bid to hide the expression of disapproval he knew was on his face.

“And here,” Stannis looked up. “Is as good a time as any to ask. Why did you do it?”

Jaime started to shrug, but Robert and Stannis were both staring at him.

“I’m going to say it; by the order of your King, explain by what reasons you chose to kill King Aerys,” Robert’s voice was no longer jovial.

Ned was watching them, leaning back in his seat, arms crossed.

“He said to burn them all, traitors and city alike, during the Sack,” Jaime finally said. “He ordered Rossart and all the Alchemists to set off the wildfire caches in the city and burn down King’s Landing with wildfire. It was to be Summerhall come again, only bigger. So I killed Rossart. And then I killed Aerys.”

“WHAT!?” Robert bellowed. “He was going to do what with wildfire!?”

“Where were the wildfire caches?” Stannis cried out. “Where!?”

Ned could say nothing, gaping at the idea of a Summerhall explosion, but in the middle of King’s Landing.

“The Red Keep itself,” Jaime listed off, eyes far away. “Underneath all the Gates. The Great Sept. The Dragonpit.”

“The Red Keep!” Stannis nearly launched himself out of his seat.

“The DRAGONPIT!? Where the Royal Marines train and barrack!?” Robert bellowed again.

“What’s all the shouting about?” Ser Colin Florent poked his head in; he was passing to pick up some food to bring back to the Book Tower.

“Wildfire! Wildfire caches in the Red Keep and the Dragonpit!” Robert stood up and waved his arms. “The Mad King was going to burn us all!”

“... And another theory proven right,” Ser Colin muttered, not very shocked at all. “Most unfortunate.”

“Another theory?” Stannis hissed. “You Florents knew and hid this from us!?”

“I’ll bring Alekyne to explain, shall I?” Ser Colin made a vague gesture at the door.

“You’d better,” Stannis growled.

“In the meantime, do calm down and order up more food. Plans need to be made,” Ser Colin bowed and made an about turn right out the door.

“Calm down, he says,” Robert stood up and began to pace. “Calm down!”

Stannis took some deep breaths before reaching over and snatched up Robert’s ale and began to chug it, to Robert’s laughing.

More food was brought up and all the Florents arrived, clearly having run back from the Book Tower. They quickly asked if Lord Harlaw was to know about the issue at hand. Stannis shook his head and a servant was dispatched to inform Lord Harlaw that issues of the Realm were being discussed in his dining hall and he was advised to not disturb the King. All bystanding servants were ordered to clear out. If Lord Harlaw wanted dinner, he’d have to have it in his private quarters.

“You are going to tell us why you didn’t tell anybody about your theories about wildfire in King’s Landing!” Robert banged on the table with his fist.

Alekyne, Imry, and Erren exchanged glances.

“She was right? Whoa,” Erren finally said.

“It was Selyse? It was Selyse,” Stannis muttered. Robert grabbed his drinking horn back out of Stannis’ hand to refill with ale. “It’s always Selyse. Seven Hells.”

“Selyse had wondered. While a little drunk, and not at all seriously,” Alekyne quickly explained. “What happened to the wildfire that we had heard Aerys used for his executions. We do know that the production of wildfire, from the clues we got from the books we had access to, results in vats of the stuff. None of us had ever seen it, nor did we know how much is needed to kill people with-”

“A gallon works for a full grown man,” Jaime interrupted, shuddering. “More burns faster and ends their misery. He liked it when they screamed longer, so he used fewer amounts each time.”

“So she concluded that there must be some left. Somewhere. In King’s Landing. She was hoping that King Robert would have the pyromancers questioned, imprisoned, or otherwise punished for their complicity in the atrocities committed against the people by King Aerys, including the murders of Lord Rickard Stark and Brandon Stark.”

Ned shifted in his seat, but kept his silence.

“So, is there more wildfire left in King’s Landing?” Alekyne raised his eyebrows in question.

After Jaime was made to repeat what he knew, the Florents turned all of their interrogative skills on him, led by Imry. Where Robert or Stannis would have bellowed or barked, respectively, Imry used a quiet, curious, sympathetic tone, friendly and easy. Jaime suspected it was an act, but he had to admit, after his experiences being questioned by his own father, it was refreshing to speak to somebody who actually listened all the way through his sentences without assumptions.

“King Aerys was going to kill millions of unknowing, innocent people. What a cunt,” Erren exclaimed once Jaime finished. “I knew he had it coming!”

Robert laughed.

“Must I regret knighting you, young man?” Ser Colin scolded him.

“I apologize for my uncouth words,” Erren replied. “But the point still stands. Selyse always said that Ser Jaime had to have the most serious, desperate, of reasons to break his vows as a Kingsguard. He didn’t do the honorable thing, but he did the right thing. The difficult choice. His strength of will and will to action is very admirable given the circumstances.”

Jaime looked very surprised at this piece of eloquence and even colored from being the point of focus of such a speech.

“Vows ought not be broken on purpose,” Lord Stark disagreed. “Or else what is the purpose of vows if they can be ignored?”

“Orders that result in the death and suffering of others without cause such as self defense are an abuse of power. Vows to a liege lord are also taken with the understanding that as obedience is given, a liege must not cause his subjects to act dishonorably in the name of obedience. We are not slaves,” Erren was becoming flushed from emotion. “A liege pledges to ask of no service that brings dishonor. You cannot have one without the other. The legitimacy of authority comes from the consent of the governed, not from threats of torture or summary executions. Ser Jaime did right to value the lives of millions of smallfolk over the life of a Mad King bent on killing everybody.”

Imry put a hand on Erren’s forearm and Erren subsided.

“Plan of action, then,” Alekyne flipped to a fresh page in his notebook. “Arrest all pyromancers for questioning.”

It was like a signal, as all the Florents present also opened their notebooks and began dash-dotting furiously while calling out their ideas.

“Remove or disable the wildfire caches.”

“Concurrent disposal must be done at night-”

“Because that stuff catches fire in sunlight-”

“What bullshit! Must reduce panicking from the cityfolk-”

“Must establish containment and evacuation procedures ahead of attempts to dispose-”

“Can we sink wildfire for temporary storage in the Blackwater?”

“Unknown until pyromancers are questioned-”

“Must have them followed first prior to arrests to find out all current members of the guild-”

“Master of Whispers? Master of Whispers-”

Ned and Jaime looked at Robert and Stannis, befuddled by this noisy process of brainstorming. Robert was sitting with his arms crossed, grinning. Stannis was also scribbling out his own ideas, but disinclined to voice his thoughts out loud, still used to having to keep his counsel.

Sheets of paper were pulled out of Florent knapsacks and the Florents and Stannis wrote out their ideas in script after tearing the papers into smaller strips. They debated while arranging the various strips of paper into order, before a clear plan of action emerged from the whole. The Florents and Stannis stood silently after the last strip of paper was arranged in place and reread the plan, eyes searching.

“Your Grace? Lord Stark and Ser Jaime? Cross-check, please,” Alekyne, the Florents and Stannis stepped away from their end of the table to eat the food brought up.

They walked around the table to read the plan right side up. It was the fastest, most detailed plan for action that Ned had ever seen put together and there were even strips with question marks for the facts they did not know the answers for and then strips of paper with lists of questions in order to get the answers they needed.

“You want me to move the court to an encampment on the tourney grounds?” Robert’s eyebrows rose.

“We certainly can’t have the King present when searching for and then disposing of the wildfire within the Red Keep,” Stannis explained. “All of the Royal Family and Small Council, all persons of the Red Keep, must be evacuated.”

“Gods, Cersei is going to have a fit,” Robert shook his head. “Well. Sensible. I see the Gates, Dragonpit, Great Sept, and then Red Keep is to be investigated and cleared, in that order?”

“Innumerable people pass through the Gates each day. Clearing them first allows for greater ease of evacuation for the larger locations.”

Robert nodded.

“Well. I don’t see anything missed. Ned? Ser Jaime?”

Both of them shook their heads.

“Right, then. Begin the plan immediately. Have a raven sent to Lord Varys to begin finding all the pyromancers. After full confirmation of their identities, have them arrested by the Gold Cloaks. Lord Varys may question them for what they know, as listed here in the plan.”

Erren bowed and left to do so.

“I’m curious,” Alekyne said, after the plan was recopied onto sheets of paper.

Stannis looked up sharply. He’s learned by now that a curious Florent is a thing of alarming potential.

“Why didn’t you tell anybody else about the wildfire conspiracy as the true reason for killing King Aerys?”

Ser Jaime’s face immediately assumed his smirk but Alekyne’s pale-eyed gaze was without judgement. Just very interested.

“I thought that by killing Rossart that the issue was finished.”

“I might just believe that you do not know that wildfire ages like wine and gets more potent in storage,” Alekyne replied. “But I do not believe that is the entire reason.”

“Ser Jaime, by order of your King, give the man the real answer,” Robert rumbled.

“Him,” Ser Jaime jabbed his finger at Lord Stark. “Sneering at me, looking at me as if I hadn’t just saved everybody! By what right does a mere wolf judge a lion? I-”

“You had an emotional reaction and chose spite over logic. Most unfortunate,” Alekyne interrupted.

Robert had to put an arm out to stop Ned from snapping at Ser Jaime.

“Peace, peace,” Ser Colin holds up his hands. “What’s done is done. We know the truth now and the wildfire will be fully removed as a threat to life.”

“You need to get better at thinking ahead,” Imry suggests.

Imry grinned cheekily at Jaime’s glare from the impertinence.

“Well. Now I’m truly glad that I can depend upon you and Ser Barristan,” Robert clapped Jaime on the shoulder.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Jaime finally said. This was all too befuddling.

Somewhere on the Sunset Sea: Ned Gets Some Advice

Robert was all too happy to gossip about the Florents as they waited for Ser Barristan to arrive from Old Wyk before setting off back to Lannisport over breakfast the next day. Ned did agree that they seemed to be the smartest (but not necessarily the wisest. Well. Ser Colin, being the eldest present, seemed a very sensible man) fellows he had ever met.

“The women of that family are sharp too! Why, Stannis’ wife Selyse is the leader of the pack, hah!”

Ned quietly listened as Robert went on, describing a woman wise beyond her years, wry and nimble of mind. She was like no other woman Robert had met before and wonder of wonders, suiting to Stannis and the two of them were a love match! Robert guffawed. Marriage was good for Stannis; keeps him so much more relaxed, Robert waggled his eyebrows at Ned. Ned promptly replied that he was certainly not interested in accounts of Stannis’ marital activities and Robert hooted and slapped his shoulder hard enough to make Ned wobble. That’s Robert Baratheon for you; he handed out grievous wounds when enraged and when very pleased, liable to leave you with bruises about the arms and shoulders and your ears ringing from the boom of his laughter. Ned rolled his shoulder. Funny, he hadn’t thought he’d forget the sensation of being Robert’s friend, but he must have. He’s glad that they are managing to overcome their past quarrel; Robert was never good at apologizing and the letter and gifts from King’s Landing were unexpected and welcome.

Ned did not have much occasion to see or speak with Stannis in the past. He only knew very well that Stannis disapproved of Robert about everything; their characters were so opposite in stamp. He also had an air of constantly wounded dignity around Robert, which Robert could not resist constantly poking at. Upon meeting him now, fitted out in proper armor and used to issuing commands to be obeyed at war, he could sense a different air about the man. Firstly, there seemed to be a sort of calm acceptance between the two brothers that Ned had never witnessed before. Robert did, Ned had to admit, have a habit of making needling, offhanded remarks at Stannis that might be interpreted in the worst ways. Stannis always did, and his expression would darken like incoming storm clouds in the Stormlands before setting his teeth to grinding and if he could not escape Robert’s presence, would respond with clipped, sharp insults and curls of his lip that resulted in the both of them brawling. Ned always felt uncomfortable around Robert and Stannis in the same room because of how they behaved as brothers; he certainly was never hurt so casually, so often, by Brandon. Why, Robert wasn’t like that with him in the first place; it baffled him that he should be so towards Stannis. Now, Robert had somehow learned to curb his tongue and Stannis was more likely to twitch a single eyebrow up instead of grinding his teeth at Robert’s japing.

Ned was surprised to find that the gifts that Robert had sent all the way to White Harbor and safely arrived at Winterfell were Florent works.

“All of it? The seed drill, harvester, tin jars, cloth, books, all of it?”

“We Dare With Craft,” Robert tapped the side of his nose. “Maybe they should be less daring with their cheek, but I’m all for their crafts and works!”

“That’s wondrous.”

“That they are. I’m very pleased by them joining the family, working for the betterment of the realm. Why, they are so interesting, I’m more interested in ruling! They don’t nag, they don’t look at me like I’m a dumb lug. Of course I’m slower than them, but they work with me. Not against me. It is very well!”

Ned was therefore predisposed, especially after seeing how they planned to rid King’s Landing of wildfire and grudgingly after the revelation and arguing for Ser Jaime’s honor after all, to see them as allies. Ser Colin and his nephews Ser Imry and Ser Erren were on the King Robert’s Hammer with them. Alekyne was on the Fury with Stannis. Robert was of the opinion that keeping the younger Florents apart would prevent them from driving everybody else mad during the voyage with their ways.

Ned was unsure as to what that might be besides impertinence.

The King Robert’s Hammer was a large galley. But a large galley proved to be too small, when he found out that the Florents considered him the most interesting person on the entire ship. They would not address him first; they held to very correct courtly manners and respected him as a Lord Paramount with the prerogative to initiate conversations. But as Robert privately laughed to him, a cat may look at a king, and foxes seemed to stare more than plain look.

He confronted Ser Colin, who seemed the most reasonable, on why they should stare at him so.

“I am not part of the innermost circle of the family,” Ser Colin smoothly replied. “I am, unfortunately, a little too old for that. I may know a few tricks yet, but it is for the young ones.”

“Surely you must know something.”

“I know that my niece Selyse has been very concerned about the state of the Night’s Watch, for as long as she has been aware of its existence.”

“The Night’s Watch?”

“Yes, my lord. The Starks have ruled over the North for thousands of years. Are you not also concerned?”

Ned shifted uncomfortably.

“The wildlings have not been more troublesome than usual. My brother Benjen would have informed me of otherwise.”

“Ah. You have family at the Wall? Good. There is nothing you can rely upon so much as family.”

“What does your Selyse want with the Night’s Watch?”

“More eyes. More... proactive stance towards their duty, perhaps. We were not surprised by the Greyjoys. Perhaps you see the sense in the North being more prepared for what lies beyond the Wall?”

“You cannot convince wildlings to make peace through new industries and trade like what was just done with the Ironmen,” Ned objected.

“Has anybody tried?”

Ned’s brow crinkled with confusion.

“I do not know.”

“Hmm,” Ser Colin smiled. “Well. Now here is a question that I see that any one of my nephews and nieces would be most interested in finding the answer to. For the ongoing peace and prosperity of the Realm.”

Ned frowned. Was this a Southron flowery way to broach a demand of him?

“The young ones are eager. Industrious. Too prone towards daring and then asking for forgiveness afterwards. After the success of all their planning in regards to the Iron Islands, they will not rest. I predict that they will turn their attention either on Dorne or the North. Or both. They wish to do good. Are you very opposed to their ideas? Do new ways... frighten you?”

Ned considered this Southron knight of a very strange House.

“It is wise to be wary.”

“Of course,” Ser Colin nods. “House Stark did not survive as long as it has by taking undue risks. You prepare. You store up. You arm up. Winter is Coming.”

Ned nods back.

“Then the only thing I can say is that no matter how alarming my nephews are, you must believe that everything they do, they do because they believe in bettering the lives of the living.”

What an odd thing to say.

“Try not to panic,” Ser Colin continued. “After they say something very shocking to you.”

“If you know what they would say, why not say it now?” Ned was impatient with games.

“I do not know what they may say. I only know that they enjoy shocking people with what they know. Proud of their own cleverness, my lord. I mean to warn you because it will not do to have a Lord Paramount gaping like a fish in public.”

Ned had cause to rue his scoffing at this when he chose to confront the first Florent nephew he saw.

“Uncle Colin’s been blabbing,” Ser Imry sighed. “He has no sense of the dramatic.”

“So you do have something that you want of me.”

“... I see that you are too obvious about your interrogating,” Imry replied critically. “Well. Come with me, if you please, my lord. You order me to tell. I obey. But not here.”

They end up going up the rigging of the largest mast. It is possibly the most terrifying thing Ned has ever done. The view of the sea and the feel of the cold wind is bracing, though.

“Are you secure in your seat, my lord?” Ser Imry asked.

They are sitting on a spar, with rope looped around their legs and waists.

“I am.”

“And you realize that there is nobody about, except us, who can hear what we speak of?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. So, Lord Stark, how fares your nephew?”

Cold, like an icicle dropping on top of his head stabs through him.

“I have no nephew!” he cries out, but it’s too late, too false even to his ears.

Ser Imry stares at him.

“Try not to panic,” Ser Imry finally says.

Ned grimaces, trying to keep his roiling stomach under control.

“Robert-”

“Is not to know. We do not forget about the other royal children.”

“How-”

“Simple matter of mathematics. Checked with Lord Arryn and the King on the troop movements during the Rebellion. You appeared at King’s Landing with a babe and my uncle Lord Florent saw him. He’s a father three times over and saw the rest of us as babes ourselves. He knows the look of infants. T’weren’t a proper newborn. You had no time to father one. And so, we wondered, why should any man care for a babe not his own? What reason could there be? Besides family? Duty? Fostering? Vows? Any of these? None of these?”

Imry shrugged.

“Many theories. No answers. And of the potential answers once we all considered all the choices, the... consequences. Consequences are very dire, indeed.”

Ned nods.

“It’s so,” he said so softly, the words are almost drowned by the wind.

“That boy is the son of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark.”

“... Yes.”

“Who else knows for sure of this fact?”

“Lord Howland Reed.”

“He hides safely in the Neck. What you have done so far will work for a little while to keep the boy safe. But you need more. More help.”

“And House Florent wishes to help?” Ned’s lip curled.

“We’ve helped already by keeping the secrets of House Stark.”

Ned had no choice but to acknowledge that this was true. It would be all too easy, with one of their own married to Lord Stannis, to reveal the truth to Robert. The question would be what their price would be to keep the secret. He had no doubt that as they were not a pack of idiots, the price would be high. He shuddered at the thought.

“Name the price then, for your House’s continued silence,” Ned swallowed. “Or must I speak with Lord Florent?”

“You need not speak with Uncle,” Imry shook his head. “You only need to promise to do what you may as Lord Paramount of the North to smooth the way with the rest of the North when House Florent has need of it.”

“What does House Florent need of the North?”

“Cooperation, when the time comes,” Imry said and Ned found it disgustingly cryptic.

“For what?” Ned frowned.

Imry looked at him with those pale eyes and Ned had a wild thought that this must be what Lord Bolton might look like if he ever smiled, one side of his mouth quirked up into a mysterious, self-satisfied smirk.

“Mutual benefit. We would not ask for what we would not also give. And we have so much to give,” Imry finally said.

Why, Ned thought to himself. Why is this House so generous? There is something strange here, as if the Florents were the opposites of Lannisters; where a Lannister always pays his debts, do Florents always try to get you indebted to them? Tricky, tricky.

“Do you know why Rhaegar did it?” Imry asked.

Ned was confused by this change in subject.

“What?”

“Do you know why Rhaegar went off with your sister? Do you seriously believe that he was just another dumb man, who was being led around by his prick?”

“Why does that matter?”

“It matters because we now know after going through Prince Rhaegar’s personal writings in Dragonstone, and at the same time, we do not know who else knows of Prince Rhaegar’s personal writings. His chambers were left abandoned, unguarded, with any number of servants and spies given the opportunity to seek out secrets. These unknown people may have cause to look for his son. To look for a son. Do you see?”

Ned swallowed, the enormity of the dangers to Jon seemingly doubling in an instant.

“Tell me.”

“What are the words of your House, my lord?”

“Winter is Coming.”

“Prince Rhaegar’s House words?”

“Fire and Blood.”

“These two ideas,” Imry gestured with his hands. “Inspired him. He was haunted by a prophecy. Prophecies are tricky, dangerous things. He thought that his line joined with the blood of the Kings of Winter, would create a... warrior. A savior for the Seven Kingdoms.”

“Madness. A savior from what? What can he possibly-”

“The Long Night come again.”

“... What nonsense!”

Imry nodded.

“Just so. The prophecy required a prince, whose song is of ice and fire. Rhaegar, with his royal prerogative, saw himself as duty bound to fulfill this prophecy and breed a savior of the world.”

“Madness,” Ned repeated.

“The fact of the matter is that any number of people believe in such prophecies. Who want a savior. Who would seek a prince to lead them.”

“Then I will turn them away.”

“My lord,” Imry shook his head. “It would only take one such person, holding some scroll or letter with Rheagar’s seal and signature mentioning Lyanna and confronting your Jon Snow. He would be enticed. A hidden prince! How romantic. How heroic. How easy to be turned astray.”

“Then what would the Florents do, if you are all so clever!?”

“You can have your wife not hate him, for a start, my lord.”

“... What?”

“Lady Catelyn writes to Lady Lysa, who is a friend of my lady cousins and my sister. She reads those letters out loud to them. Atrocious lack of discretion, but as it was us Florents in the know and not anybody else... But I digress. Lady Catelyn would shed no tears for the death of a bastard she believes shames her. But a nephew? A Tully would fiercely protect a nephew.”

“You and I do not know if she can be trusted in such a matter,” Ned grudgingly said. “It is dangerous.”

“Well. He need not be nephew by Lyanna Stark. There are your brothers. Benjen would be a much less threatening choice than Brandon. Brandon was heir. Benjen is sworn to the Wall. Even better a choice. Do you not agree?”

Ned chewed his lip, thinking.

“That might work. Except that I brought him up from the south and Benjen has not-”

“Has he? Really? Not ever been assigned to follow a Wandering Crow on their regular trips to the south as part of training? Not ever at risk for having his head turned by comely shepherdess or milk maid along the way? What does Lady Catelyn know of the traditions of the Night’s Watch?”

“... Clever.”

“Inform Benjen. I assume he loved Lyanna too? Would he keep the secret for her sake?”

“Yes,” Ned said fiercely. “He loves Jon too, as one of the family.”

“Then it is done.”

Ned nodded. Until he had another thought.

“What shall I tell Catelyn about why I lied in the first place? What am I to do about how everybody thinks that he is my bastard now? It is common knowledge and cannot be changed without raising suspicion.”

“... Only she and Benjen would need to know your changed lie; no one else. As to why? You wanted to shield Benjen. You made a huge mistake trying to cover for his mistake, seeing as he is a Black Brother. You were overwrought with grief over Lyanna’s death and had too much to drink. You lost your mind the moment you held the baby, holding one more kin of yours after losing so many in so short a time! Apologize very much, give her some jewelry, and say that you were a stupid lump of a man who is unworthy of shining her shoes and kiss her a lot and roll around with her in bed. Choose one or all of the above.”

“Think up all of that just now, did you?” Ned snorted.

“I’m not the married man, you are. One would think you’d know the rules of engagement, by now, when it comes to an angry wife,” Imry made a cheeky flash of his teeth.

Ned blinked disapprovingly, but sighed in defeat.

“You must now prepare the boy.”

“More Florent cleverness?”

“If you fail to plan, you plan to fail,” Imry said in a singsong voice.

Ned impatiently gestures at Imry to continue.

“The prophecy was Essosi. You must have him learn Valyrian so that he cannot be caught unawares or tricked by those who think to hide their words by speaking in tongues he has never heard of. He must be taught how to fight and fight well to defend himself. As your nephew, you must let him know you might give him a holdfast in the North, so that he takes no interest in the South. Have him learn what it takes to be a lord who must give orders to men. And lastly, you must teach him some... cunning. So that he does not blindly follow the flatteries of those who wish to use him for their own ends.”

“I am not sure I can teach him the very last,” Ned finally says.

“At least you know what you lack,” Imry said sympathetically. “Perhaps in this I can help.”

“What? Are you suggesting you enter into service with me, as Master of Cunning, Lies, and Cunning Lies?”

“Now that’s a job,” Imry laughed appreciatively. “No, my lord. With your permission, we Florents would send along a selection of the books where there are tales of doublecrossing, trickery, and con artistry that will most definitely offend your sense of honor. But it will also perhaps save your nephew's skin.”

“You have books for instructing youth in doublecrossing, trickery, and con artistry?” Ned’s brow crinkled skeptically.

“Yes. Now do you want all of them at once, or do you want them doled out gradually on his namedays? We can start him off with child friendly tales and increase in complexity as he ages. Would you like a list of the books in order of difficulty?”

Meanwhile, Erren was sitting on a barrel on the deck, with Ser Colin standing beside him. They were both looking upward, observing Imry and Ned.

“I still think it’s too soon. Selyse says Lord Stark is as unlike cunning and cleverness as can be. This will end in death and destruction, I say.”

“She’ll have to get used to you two having other ideas,” Ser Colin shrugged. “You’re both grown men, though you two do not act like it. Knights of the realm. Worthy of deciding how you go about your missions after receiving them.”

Erren nodded.

“Will you go directly back to Dragonstone?” Ser Colin finally asked.

“We all had thought to visit with Tyrion Lannister.”

“Ah? Do you have an invitation to Casterly Rock?”

“Who says anything about the Rock? He’ll meet us at Lannisport.”

“Ah.”

Casterly Rock: Dancing in the Lions' Den

King Robert felt that a feast for the returning victors of the Greyjoy Rebellion was the least he could do. He wanted a tourney, but knew that he had to be economical; after all, the ships of the Iron Islands Trading Company have not been built yet and the treasury would need the funds for the enterprise. That was on top of the municipal work improving the King's Road, training to replace the Gold Cloaks and Royal Marines who had died in battle, the paying out of widows or dependents' pensions, and who knows what in King's Landing to take care of the wildfire business. The brave men deserved lauding and felicitations and they were going to get it.

Stannis grumbled and muttered and ground his teeth, as usual.

"What is your objection this time?" Robert tried to be calm. Be calm. Be calm. Don't call him a lousy little shit out to spoil all your fun. Lady Selyse would come for him if he did.

Stannis made an abrupt, frankly painful looking jerk of his head at him; he wasn't sneering, yet.

"Use your words," Robert said, just as Selyse would.

That made Stannis' eyes bug out for a moment of affronted pique before he exhaled, ruefully annoyed at Robert using one of Selyse's coaxing techniques against him.

"We need to get back to King's Landing. The wildfire-"

"Will be taken care of after all the pyromancers are rounded up. We don't know how long that will take."

"The tourney grounds need to be prepared for Red Keep evacuation-"

"Jon will take care of that."

"I need to be with Selyse! I don't know how she is, what if she's in labor as we speak! What if she's- lost-"

"Oh, no, whoa there," Robert clapped a hand on Stannis' shoulder and shook him firmly. "Don't think like that. Stannis. Steady on."

"What would you know! You went hunting when Cersei was bleeding and screaming for a day and more! You don't know anything!" Stannis rounded on him and Robert had to quickly bat away a fist coming towards his face.

It was not in Stannis' capacities to explain in any form or fashion that as Selyse's midsection waxed like the moon, carrying a new life within her, he was astounded and worried more than he ever did before in his life. Selyse would cluck with satisfaction like an expectant hen brooding, and take his hand to place over the bulge and he felt movement, foreign and

strange underneath his palm. Alive. Other lords may be vaguely concerned only with getting a proper, healthy heir. Stannis could only dread the idea of Selyse dying by childbirth. If she should perish, he was sure that he would never be happy again. A freezing sensation would form in his gut at the thought, so like that upwell of terror he felt long ago, watching his parents' ship break apart in the bay. He would go on, he supposed. He didn't think he would waste away without her after surviving things like the siege. He knew loss. But he also knew he would be hollowed out and any good, happy feelings he had would be snuffed out. Don't die, he wished, even as he concentrated on battle in the Iron Islands. I'm not myself without you.

"You know what?" Robert looked at him critically, noting the high color of Stannis truly failing to control his temper. In a minute that Baratheon temper would reach unstoppable levels. He knew the signs. "Either you calm down like your wife would want you to, or I throw you around a training yard until you can't stand up. What will it be?"

"The yard, then," Stannis snarled, after taking futile deep breaths. "I don't want to think!"

Robert gladly went through long bouts of sparring and grappling with Stannis. It turned out that beating the worry out of him was just the thing to have him quiet, if not polite or at all good company, for the feasting. It also helped that Robert reminded him that as Master of Ships it was his duty to be present for the sake of the Royal Navy captains, crew, and marines who expected to be acknowledged for their service. Stannis looked like he was going to muster up enough energy to try throttling him for that bit of cheek, but merely ground his teeth for a moment and nodded sharply. There. Hah.

In the meantime, the Florents found Tyrion waiting for them in Lannisport as expected. Tyrion was almost afraid that they would shame him by picking him up like a child to embrace, judging from their puppylike enthusiasm on seeing him in person for the first time in years, but instead, they extended their hands out to clasp his in greeting. Much more dignified. He led them to a friendly tavern and got seated towards the back, around a corner, for privacy.

"Why, Imry! You've grown yourself some very dashing and impressive moustaches!" Tyrion joked.

"Thank you," Imry tilted his head. "I had a beard too, but I thought it was a bit much. So I shaved it off."

"Quite right, quite right, you do need to allow the rest of us some chance of being distinguished," Tyrion replied.

"Why don't you start?" asked Erren immediately. "You would look well with moustaches of your own."

"Ought I?"

"Tyrion, you're not a child, though you will stay the stature of one," Erren's tone was serious. "I think growing a moustache will make people take you more seriously. You're a man now. That's just my opinion, of course. I wouldn't presume to tell a Lannister what to do."

Tyrion was struck by how much they were his friends. In the past years, he was receiving and writing letters to all the Florents at a rate of one or more a week. The short raven suitable notes were all well and good, but they also exchanged longer letters that required messengers to deliver. He was fairly sure that if he were anybody but a Lannister, he'd be severely punished for the cost of messengers alone. As it was, in their letters they told him not only of their experiments, but gossiped about King's Landing and the doings of the Small Council, as far as they could get from Lord Stannis or Lord Arryn during dinners. hilariously, Selyse and Delena had all sorts of asides about Cersei and their continued encounters with her in court. They had very little to report of Jaime himself except that he was present or not with King Robert in court or training.

He probably knew more about the plans and methods of the Royal Fleet and the Small Council in preparation for the Greyjoy Rebellion than even his father! Since he was never asked about the contents of his letters, he kept his source of knowledge a secret.

"We don't have much time," Alekyne said. "We'll tell you all about the fighting and sailing, shall we?"

"Yes, do tell me everything!" Tyrion nodded.

"Wait, wait, we have to tell him about Ser Jaime!" Erren interrupted.

"Jaime?"

"Oh," Alekyne nodded. "Ser Jaime! Yes, I might as well. And then when Robert chooses to surprise everybody including your father, you'll not be surprised too!"

Tyrion had much rather preferred to hear about the sea battles, but if it was about Jaime, that sounded good too.

By the end of the explanation of the wildfire conspiracy, Tyrion had his hands over his eyes.

"Jaime, Jaime, why didn't he tell anybody!" Tyrion moaned in annoyance. "He's saved King's Landing! He's a hero!"

"... I recommended that he learn better about decision making," Imry shrugged. "I think he wants to kill me for saying so."

"Well, he shan't because I'll say so too!" Tyrion nodded decisively. "Today!"

It was then that the Florents were free to recount the battles of the Greyjoy Rebellion, the incredible speed in which the Royal Fleet doubled the peninsula of Dorne and out sailed the best captains of the Redwyne and Lannister fleets, and sank practically all the Ironmen ships they encountered. The battle at Fair Isle was too exciting and Alekyne's long practice at telling a good story was put to good use.

They shared tankards of the tavern's ale and Tyrion felt quite good.

"I must ask," Imry said quietly. "Has your father remained... cruel in his treatment of you? Your lab work must seem very strange."

Tyrion huffed.

“Father doesn’t understand at all. I don’t know that I’ve done anything worthwhile-” at this the younger Florents protested, saying that his letters to them about his experiments were more than worthy. “But he’s left me alone since I spend all my time in my lab instead of ‘bringing shame to the name of Lannister with my drinking and whoring’.”

“Well, I approve, because alcohol poisons the liver and the mind over time. You’ve got too good a mind to drown,” Alekyne patted his shoulder.

“But what about the whores?” Tyrion leered at him.

“Possible spies, thieves, or assassins. Or you’ll catch a pox. Best be cautious,” Alekyne replied reasonably. “People like us have actual secrets we must guard.”

“... They may also be victims,” Imry said quietly. “Sold by drunkard fathers or kin to pay off debts. Young widows. Tricked into thinking they were being hired for honest jobs and pressed into the work by procurers. Or plain starving and making a living how they may.”

“You’re strangely sympathetic about whores,” Tyrion raised his eyebrows.

“A lot would turn to honest work if they could,” Erren shrugged. “We employ some past whores at our mills and factories and tin jarring teams at Brightwater Keep. And we’ve asked them about their pasts. That’s how we know.”

Tyrion took a drink, thinking on the matter.

“Well. I suppose that’s so,” he finally said. “But you’ll not see Father being seen doing things as trying to save the whores of the world.”

“Will you be paying us a visit?” Alekyne tried changing the subject. “To the Foxhole?”

“I might as well,” Tyrion said. “Father forbid me from going to tour the Free Cities with Uncle Gerion.”

He took another drink of ale.

“He’s put me in charge of the cisterns, drains, and sewers of Casterly Rock. Said that if I was so clever, I should figure it out.”

Tyrion ruefully expected the resulting eyebrow dancing of the Florents at each other at the news.

“That’s shitty of him,” Erren finally said. Tyrion snickered.

“He may have intended it as a slight, but I think that’s a good project,” Ser Colin finally spoke up.

“Really?” Tyrion crinkled his nose.

“Truly. King’s Landing is greatly improved by the ideas of my nieces and nephews. What’s more, we’re making money off of the waste. Urine and dung, both. People may laugh, but I say there’s something sweet about Florents turning shit into gold. Which is more possible than turning lead into gold.”

“I don’t know that Father would be impressed if I did turn shit into gold. We have enough gold as it is, you see.”

“Despite that. I liked you well enough from the letters you sent to my children. I like you more now that I’ve met you in person. It is a sorry thing that your father cannot see the value in a smart, polite, well spoken son.”

Tyrion blinked.

“... But I’m a dwarf.”

Ser Colin looked uncomfortably towards his nephews. They would know better ways of speaking on the matter.

“Selyse once said that it is like dwarfs are humans who happen to be ponies if we were horses. There’s nothing wrong with ponies. So there’s nothing wrong with dwarfs,” Erren said. “And if I hear anybody saying so, I’ll beat them up and take their money.”

Tyrion laughed.

A Lannister servant found them and informed them that their presence was required for the feast.

“Well, the show is on,” Imry stood. “Best not miss the coming amusements.”

Tyrion tried to inform his father about the truth of Jaime’s actions during the Sack. He didn’t even get a word in; he was very curtly informed to take his seat, be still, and to not embarrass the House by getting drunk. Tyrion sighed. He looked across the hall wistfully to where the Florents were seated with the Reacher lords who participated in putting down the Greyjoy Rebellion; mostly Redwynes and Hightowers and other coastal Houses.

Alekyne was very tolerantly fielding the attentions of various Redwyne and Hightower maidens. It was known that Bronze Yohn had wanted to catch Alekyne as a good-son, but happily settled for gaining Rhea as good-daughter. The tons of tin and copper ingots being sent on to King’s Landing or Brightwater Keep for the Florent backed industries were proof of prudence of such schemes. Tyrion knew from Imry and Erren’s letters that his sisters and Selyse had inadvertently set Alekyne on an impossible path; he would probably wish to marry a woman with some talent for thinking. Most unfortunately it seemed that only his own family produced such women so far. Imry wrote wryly of Alekyne making small talk at court or any number of Reach tourneys and feasts, trying to change the subject to something of meatier interest and would find simpering and wide eyed agreement of all his opinions. He would contradict his opinions midway and watch as these same ladies would all nod their heads and agree, not having any idea of what he said.

At this rate, Imry wrote, I think he's willing to take any lady who knows her numbers, truly knows her numbers, and is not like to let Brightwater Keep's accounts become a mess from swindling. He'll have to rely on Florents for conversation and sharing of his ideas. He doesn't like the idea, of course. That seems terribly lonely.

King Robert stood and made a rousing speech about the bravery of the sailors and fighting foot who fought and won against the Iron Islanders. Everybody cheered as he named the different bannermen who participated.

"Now, good subjects of the Seven Kingdoms, good, loyal subjects! Do we punish the Iron Islanders after this? Do we punish the bannermen who had no choice but to follow the orders of their greedy cunt of a liege lord? Do we?"

There were some confused murmurs from that. Nobody dared answer one way or another.

"No!" Robert bellowed. "We do not! The Ironmen are good sailors and good sailors obey their captains. Lord Balon Greyjoy was a bad captain! He foundered them against the might of the Royal Fleet!"

Roars came from the captains of the Royal Fleet from this.

"My lords, when they proclaim that I am King of the Seven Kingdoms, I do not wish to gainsay that. The Iron Islands have been ignored and left out of the fold. I mean to bring them in and the skill of their good sailing men will now do good for the realm! A bright future will be built, with trading ships that will be manned and captained by the best sailors of the Seven Kingdoms!"

Few cheers came from that, but Robert went on, changing course. He called upon Jorah Mormont and Jacelyn Bywater, knighting them to the greater applause and cheers from the crowds.

"And finally. Ser Jaime! Come here, man!"

Tyrion hazarded looking at his father. He immediately turned his head back to the proceedings; Lord Tywin's countenance looked murderous.

"Ser Jaime has been wronged by me. I admit it. The King has made a mistake!"

The crowd was silent, confused.

"Ser Jaime has sacrificed his oath, and honor, and duty to the Mad King for the cause of higher, truer oaths. His first oaths, Knight's Oaths. For he bravely and justly protected the young and the innocent and lives of women and men. Here, today, I declare that Ser Jaime Lannister is a knight among knights. For he, not for fame or glory, saved the innocent lives of King's Landing from death by wildfire!"

Tyrion was free to absorb the cries of surprise and questioning from the crowd. He dare not look at his father.

King Robert launched into a stirring retelling about the murdering treachery of the Mad King giving orders for wildfire to be left in various places within King's Landing. He laid out how after unjustly and cruelly murdering a Lord Paramount and his heir, he was not satisfied, wanting to bring destruction and death to innocents who had done no wrong.

"It was then, when the Mad King gave the order to Burn Them All, that Ser Jaime made the choice! A difficult choice! A righteous choice! The lives of the many, over the life of a madman, a monster! He slew the Mad King and saved us all!"

If there was one thing King Robert knew how to do, was inspire a crowd. They cheered loudest this time around, with cries of Ser Jaime! Ser Jaime! Knight Among Knights!

Tyrion did not look at his father. Perhaps he was pleased that now after this, surely Jaime would no longer be known as Kingslayer or Oathbreaker. Or was he furious that Jaime kept the reason behind his actions a secret, causing the stain on his reputation in the first place, no matter the revelation of truth afterwards? Gods, he needed a drink.

The feast itself was less than pleasurable because of this uncertainty. As fine a spread as produced by his cousins, Tyrion found he could only pick at his plate. Would Father require his presence for the inevitable confrontation with Jaime? He hoped not. Which meant that he probably would end up in the same room while Father tore into Jaime. What a mess.

It turned out that his predictions were correct. They were ordered into a private room within one of the Lannisport Lannisters' manses. The door shut, guards marched away. Silence. And then the deadly quiet rumble that passed for Tywin's roar came into play. Why keep his rage directed at one son when two would do?

"Has this been nothing but some joke for you?" Tywin's voice whiplashed out at Jaime. "Did you enjoy the lowering of your name when in truth you deserved-"

"I did not do it for glory," Jaime foolishly interrupted him.

"Do. Not-!" Tywin's finger thrust into the air at Jaime's face.

Tyrion was pretty sure he didn't manage to hide his wince.

"From the first day, the first hour-! Why did you tell NO ONE of this!?"

"I had an emotional reaction and chose spite instead of reason," Jaime quickly replied.

Tyrion gaped.

"You still DARE joke-"

"Father, do not do what they did on that day and assume that everything I do is a joke. We all know it is not so," Jaime tried again, with a firmer tone.

They stared at each other, until Tywin gestured, allowing Jaime to continue.

“I felt nothing but righteousness after doing the deed. But I had hours to wait for somebody to come to the throne room. I panicked. I panicked, Father. I could only think that I would be condemned because after all, I did break my vow. So I resolved to face it with levity. It was stupid of me.”

“I trust that you are not hiding any more heroic acts from public knowledge?” Tywin finally said.

“I am not. Everything worth knowing has been announced.”

Tywin sat in silence some more, making them stand and wait for his judgement. Tyrion, of course, was developing an itch at the back of his neck that he was most definitely not going to scratch because if you don’t move, maybe Tywin won’t see you. Especially since he was that much shorter, to better escape notice.

The lies you tell yourself to make living bearable, Tyrion scoffed to himself.

“Your lamentable oversight has been corrected. How did the King come to know of the truth?”

“King Robert was moved to apologize to Lord Stark for being in the wrong in some argument between them, I know not what. He was moved, having obtained forgiveness from Lord Stark, to attempt to make amends to me for naming me Kingslayer. Lord Stannis then asked me why I did it. So I was made to answer by order of the King.”

“And none of them suspected?”

“Considering the panic from my confession about the wildfire conspiracy, no.”

“So by chance, if King Robert had not been in a mood to make amends and if Lord Stannis was not present to be curious, you would have kept silent on the matter?”

“Yes.”

And here, Tywin did not have to do anything, just stare at Jaime. The brothers were well used to the ‘You Disappoint Me and All the Worthwhile Lannisters Who Ever Came Before You’ stare.

“This wildfire conspiracy. Explain it and what is being done about it.”

Jaime did. Tyrion found it interesting enough to relax a little as he listened.

“The Lord Hand will be overseeing the removal of the wildfire caches. The King will not?”

“He admits that as he solves most problems by hitting them with his hammer that wiser, calmer heads should prevail in this matter.”

Tyrion observed as Tywin’s head tilted slightly, considering this choice by the King. He knew that Father would mock King Robert to Uncle Kevan occasionally in private as a loudmouthed fool, only barely less oafish than Mace Tyrell and only one to fear because of

his undeniable ability as an unstoppable killer when in battle. This news that the King was aware of his own shortcomings and furthermore, not so proud or foolish as to ignore his weaknesses was an interesting, unexpected sign of character.

“This plan addressing the wildfire. It is the creation of the Florents?”

And here, Tyrion felt a thrill of fear go down his spine at the speculative change in his father’s expression.

“And Lord Stannis.”

“The Florents are proving to be such a very useful House,” Tywin finally said.

Might be a good thing in Father’s opinion, Tyrion thought. Might be very bad. He can’t tell this time from Father’s tone alone and that is most distressing.

“You mean their ideas for the betterment of the Iron Islands and the formation of the Iron Islands Trading Company?” Jaime asked.

“They do have an unexpected facility for industry and trade,” Tywin sniffed. Dismissively.

“The King has been inspired, perhaps by this recent farce of a rebellion, to begin trying to have Dorne positively disposed towards his rule. He has asked me to give over Ser Gregor and Ser Armory to the Martells.”

“Will you do it?” Jaime asked.

“What would you do?” Tywin looked at him, testing.

“I would?”

“Why.”

Jaime shrugged.

Tywin’s nostrils flared in annoyance at his stupidity for a moment.

“You. What say you?” he directed his attention to Tyrion, who straightened.

“I would, Father.”

Tywin gestured that he should proceed.

“Politically, it does make sense that King Robert attempt to appease the Dornish in order to solidify his rule. I would do so because accommodating the King in this small matter will make him and the Small Council better disposed towards me for future endeavors.

The Small Council didn’t need to give over mining rights to House Lannister. King Robert could’ve had the rights remained to the Crown. Some could say that the destruction of the Iron Fleet at Fair Isle is enough recompense for the attack on Lannisport, to say nothing of warning you two years beforehand.

With early news of the Trading Company, you have a chance to invest in more shares earlier. That means greater risk, yes, but also greater profit. I would also bet that the Florents would continue with their profitable ideas and if they do not keep such ideas to themselves, it would be beneficial to have the Small Council and King well disposed to us such that early pick continues to be given to us for future investments.”

“You focus very much on profit.”

“You can buy any number of competent killers who can obey orders. You have hundreds of knights at your command, Father. Ideas like the Trading Company and the fastest trade ships ever built in Westeros or the world don’t come every day. To say nothing of mining rights like you just gained from the foolish mistakes of another Lord Paramount. You have ever taught us to take advantage of the mistakes of others to our benefit.”

Tywin nodded his head after a few minutes. Huh. He’s gotten a nod from his father. A day of surprises.

“What has been revealed to you with those letters you receive from the young Florents?”

“The youngest speak of their lessons. Erren writes of his experiments on Dragonstone. Imry writes of his observations while traveling. Alekyne has been writing of the goings on within King’s Landing. Lady Selyse writes occasionally about Royal Fleet matters and court gossip.”

“Very trusting of them,” Tywin sneered.

“Not really, Father. They write that they are doing experiments but not what they are precisely doing. Saying that one has plans doesn’t really surprise. Everybody is planning something. I believe I only receive news of what they are sure to accomplish. In all other ways, they have disciplined discretion. Lord Florent has taught them well.”

At no point is he going to reveal that they chatter in a friendly manner to him over the letters, full of hilarious riddles, jokes, and sarcastic opinions.

“Nonetheless. Your continued association with them is useful.”

Left unsaid is that they keep him occupied in his lab instead of shaming the House. Tyrion is very sure that his father thinks that he is not actually doing anything worthwhile. Well. He’s not too sure himself if he’s doing anything worthwhile. But there is a very quick way to address that.

“Father, on the subject of associating with Florents.”

Tywin makes a nod, so that he is allowed to continue.

“As they are here in Lannisport, am I permitted to show the Florents my lab?”

Tywin did not answer for a few seconds. Which was a good sign, as he was always immediate with his refusals.

“What is it that they want to see?”

Nothing you’d understand, Tyrion thought.

“I’ve described my equipment and set up. I commissioned some of the best glassmakers with your permission, remember? Or at least, Uncle Kevan approved the expenditures. They want to see my beakers.”

Tyrion did not notice Jaime mouthing ‘what the Seven Hells is a beaker?’ to himself.

“You may. They may not stay overlong.”

“Thank you, Father.”

The Florents accept the invitation immediately. Lord Stannis was in a tear to go immediately after the feast and not even King Robert could convince him to stay overnight in Lannisport. He departed immediately along with Ser Davos with just enough guards and retinue to keep him safe on the Gold Road. Tyrion was curious to see that none of the Florents expressed the same amount of worry.

“Of course we worry,” Imry said immediately. “We all love Selyse. But he’s IN love with her. That makes all the difference.”

Tyrion’s eyebrows raised. He hadn’t thought somebody as foreboding on first impression, like his own father, could be in love.

They had no compunctions about gossiping about Lord Stannis and Lady Selyse. They remembered very clearly how she really was something of an eager puppy those first days of their betrothal and Tyrion could almost see it, Stannis standing tall and awkward as she bounded at him and blinded him with science. How they all had doubts about how it would turn out as he truly was rude, ill-tempered, and scorned the finer social graces.

“We like him now,” Alekyne said. “He’s a good leader, he cares about results and not flattery, and he understands and values doing things correctly and thoroughly in order to achieve his goals. But in the beginning?”

“Madness, I thought,” Erren said. “I thought; why is Selyse being wasted on some grumbling, scowling grump? The man doesn’t laugh. Well. I’ve never observed so and Omer and Merrell have been watching him and they don’t report so, either.”

“How does it work, then?” Tyrion asked.

“She finds him funny. And he’s a really good fu-”

Imry’s hand was viper quick when he slapped the back of Erren’s head. Erren hissed and rubbed his head, but did not continue, readily accepting Imry’s silent rebuke for his carelessness.

“Finds him funny?” Tyrion hazarded, choosing to ignore Erren’s scandalous implication.

“Truly. Now, Lord Stannis isn’t some wit, but he’s made some spectacularly good insults in private when referring to those he most dislikes in court.”

“Get him going and he’s savage,” Imry nodded, grinning. “She is most amused by his statements of opinion on others.”

“He’s not an idiot, either.”

“So we learned to appreciate and like Lord Stannis. She didn’t have to learn. She just... wanted him. Probably immediately, strange to think as that is.”

“Harrenhal,” Imry said. “She noticed him as early as that.”

“Really?” Erren asked, as he was not there and too young, besides.

“Mmmhmm,” Imry nods. “Looked at him for a very long time through the far-eye when we were sitting in the tourney stands and Melessa and Rhea were teasing her about saying that she liked his eyebrows for days after.”

“That’s a thing women notice?” Erren asked, sounding a little worried.

“That’s a thing Selyse notices,” Alekyne shrugged.

“I think it’s misdirection,” Imry said. “I think she really means his eyes, but of course she couldn’t just say so in front of Uncle Alester or Melessa and Rhea. Wouldn’t be proper for a lady to say, though I don’t know why. It’s not like women are blind, after all.”

“Oh,” Erren said.

“Obviously,” Imry waved a hand. “She does call him Stanny Blue Eyes, after all.”

“Stanny Blue Eyes,” Tyrion repeated, incredulous.

All of the Florents turned to look at him simultaneously. Their expressions remained friendly. And yet at the same time, Tyrion was very sure that the message that should he reveal this to anybody else, he would die in a horrible manner, was being drilled into his head. He really must learn how to achieve that. Not just anybody can learn Tywin’s special murder stare, not even him, his son.

“Well. Here is my lab!” Tyrion trots ahead to push the door open.

His lab was located in the old castle proper of Casterly Rock; the ancient Casterly construction on top, where it would not be too much of a disaster should one of his experiments go awry and cause explosions. (Not that he was daring enough to mess about with such projects. That’s for Erren on Dragonstone. No, he was going to titrate his way to knowledge, thanks) The hike downwards into the Rock itself to where the modern living apartments are located were so strenuous for him that he had his chambers moved to the Casterly castle section. It also helped that Maester Creylan’s ravenry was also located in the upper section, so he could regularly check for Florent raven messages first thing in the morning.

He had taken over the entirety of one of the halls for a capacious laboratory. Within the long interior, he had long tables built to accommodate his height. Closest to the door is a table where he regularly takes his meals. On this table he drops off any equipment that he allows the servants to touch and then clean up. At no point is anybody outside of himself and Maester Creylan to touch anything beyond the table.

It turns out that the Florents do actually want to see his beakers. They were very impressed by the quality of the glass in his lab and they are especially impressed by the work done to produce his glass retorts.

As of now, he hasn't accomplished anything more than testing the various metals and ores that were continually being pulled out of the active Casterly Rock mines. He had a few samples of metal set aside. All he knew was that they were definitely Not-Gold, Not-Iron, Not-Tin, and Not-Silver. He was speaking with Erren, who was most experienced with testing of unknown materials, while Alekyne, Imry, and Ser Colin wandered within the wider lab, looking at his books, drawings, and records of his experiments.

“Tyrion?” Alekyne called out. “What’s this?”

Tyrion looked up.

“Oh. That’s just a clock, so that I know how long I’ve been working. Maester Creylan gets concerned that I don’t sleep enough.”

Alekyne and Imry were staring very intently at an assemblage of gears and cogwheels within a frame hung upon the wall, with weights and a steadily swinging pendulum.

“So it’s the nineteenth hour?” Imry pointed to a crossbow bolt affixed to a gear in front of a circular panel with 24 hours listed.

“And twenty five minutes, as you can see with this panel. I joined up more gears to show seconds also so that I know if a gear’s stuck or not,” Tyrion pointed to two other circular panels; one had a much faster spinning bolt.

“... You’ve made a 24 hour clock.”

“... Yes?” Tyrion looked up at the Florents, raising his eyebrows. “Surely you built one of your own.”

“No!” Imry cried out, excited. “Tyrion, this is brilliant! You’re brilliant!”

“Do tell us how this works,” Alekyne nodded. “You’ve come up with something entirely new!”

While Tyrion was explaining, the minute bolt reached 30 minutes and a little hammer swung and hit a bell.

Tyrion almost laughed at how the Florents’ mouths dropped open.

“You’ve added a bell to alert you to the time!? Excellent!” Erren cried out.

“Is it really so special?” Tyrion asked, hopeful.

“Yes!” all of the Florents cried.

“The precision needed!”

“Using weights and a pendulum to keep the gears moving!”

“If you could design more, I’d pay for one! It’s overcast so much on Dragonstone I lose track of time all the time,” Erren nodded vigorously.

“We definitely need one at the Foxhole,” Alekyne added. “Or more!”

Tyrion was happy to design with them, as they carefully brought the clock down off the wall so that they could properly see the assembly from all sides. They measured the gears, drew diagrams, and stayed very excited. Ser Colin did not join them, happy to sit and watch his nephews in their element. They stayed for no more than a fortnight, where Tyrion showed them around Casterly Rock. Of course, they invaded the library and enthusiastically flipped through books that they had merely heard the titles of in other books.

They had to sit through dinners with Lord Tywin himself and the other adult Lannisters. There were some poorly hidden sneers when Ser Imry and Ser Erren were first announced, as they were considered full young to be knighted and neither having shown at all at any tourneys. On the other hand, Tyrion now knew that Ser Colin placed more importance on actual experience in combat and properly killing enemies; hence his decision. Tyrion knew after speaking with Ser Colin that he was fully confident that Imry and Erren were capable of understanding the importance of taking the Knight’s Oath seriously and the maturity to make moral decisions in addition to them fighting well during the Greyjoy Rebellion. Tyrion had wondered at why Alekyne was not similarly knighted despite making a good showing during the taking of Great Wyk. Alekyne had not seemed to mind, so Tyrion put it out of his mind.

Tyrion certainly never had cause to feel embarrassment with his friends. The Florents displayed grace and table manners that were trained for appearances at court, except that Tyrion was willing to suspect that not even Cersei showed so well. Furthermore, they all were able to tell the stories of their involvement in the fighting during the Greyjoy Rebellion very well, which won the interest and approval of the men. Certainly they did not imbibe too much wine over the course of the meal, which is to his father’s approval.

In fact, they treated the served wine in what Tyrion supposed was a particularly Reacher sort of way; casual and yet intimidating because of how each glass commanded their full attention. They didn’t drink to merely keep their mouths wet between bites. In this, they were even more sophisticated than the Lannisters and other Westerners present. They picked up their wineglasses after the first pour, made neat little swirls with efficient wrist movement and raised the glasses to their noses, sniffing, their eyes dropping closed. Of course, they smiled from their first impressions, because unacceptable vintages would never grace Lord Tywin Lannister’s table, and they took measured sips. They kept the wine on their tongues, not swallowing immediately, making soft hummings of pleasure afterwards, their eyebrows raising at each other. Their quiet judgement was enough to make even the most secure Lannisters present anxious for their approval. Tyrion chuckled to himself; if they thought a

few Florents raised and educated on good Reach wines were suddenly intimidating, how much more would a proper Redwyne upset them! Uncle Gerion cheerfully inquired as to what it was they were humming about and they all replied with enthusiasm about what they tasted; warmth and fruits as cherry and plum, dark earth, oak, and even smoke. Smoke! Tyrion took a sip from his glass, curious as to whether or not they were jesting, having never heard of such a thing before. Why, there was something smoky, now that he was thinking of it! Interesting!

One of the ladies, after taking a more measured sip, asked if that meant that there were cherries and plums in the wine itself. The Florents' eyebrows raised all at once, but they were gracious enough when they responded in the negative. It was all in the grapes, the sunlight and the particular patch of earth and water they were given, changed like magic as they were pressed and squeezed and aged in their barrels, growing mysteriously rich over the years with flavors that tripped one after another over the tongue if only one took the time to taste. Nobody knows yet how it was possible for a grape to mimic the flavor of cherries and plums all at once. But how fortunate that it was so, yes?

They also won the attention of the women by being much more knowledgeable than expected about the latest styles of the court. It seemed that Cersei did not trouble herself to maintain correspondence with any of her lady cousins and certainly the Lannister ladies of the Rock would not stoop to ask outright after the letters received by the relatives of Cersei's Westernmen ladies-in-waiting.

"There are two competing modes of dress at court," Alekyne explained. "Those who follow Queen Cersei, as expected. And those who follow after Lady Arryn and my cousin, Lady Selyse Baratheon. I expect that you would wish to follow your cousin?"

Tyrion was amused by the wavering of his lady cousins. For the talk of the Rock after Lord and Lady Baratheon's wedding was all about her wedding dress and the similarly daringly tight cuts of the other Florent ladies' dresses and how scandalous their new dance was. What's more, nobody knew anybody who knew how to do the Foxtrot; it piqued their interest that this dance was rumored fashionable amongst the Reacher set of King's Landing as well as the most influential of Valemen. It would not do for the leading family of the Westerlands to be behind on such fashionable matters!

"That depends," Marielle Lannister replied. "On which kind of dress causes a man to take notice, my lord."

"Ah," Imry nodded. "Well. There is no question that Selyse is wise in the ways of dress in that way. She is wont to say: Less is more."

"Less is more?" all of the Lannister ladies looked confused indeed.

Tyrion snickered into his cup. What a thing to say to any Lannister of the Rock! Why do less, when excess suits them so well?

"Less fabric. More... attention," Imry quirked his eyebrows and the cousins all giggled and flushed.

“Simple matter of mathematics,” Erren muttered to Tyrion, who grinned.

Tyrion supposed that the value of the Florent jacket would be lost on his cousins, seeing as they had no cause at all to value a good set of pockets, unlike himself. There were snickers at his new jackets when he first started wearing them, no mistake. But he could see very clearly how the impeccable jackets of the Florents, on Florents, were inspiring all sorts of obvious giggles and gazes that were starting to exasperate his uncles and male cousins.

That was in addition to the novelty and charm of speaking with young fellows like sophisticated Alekyne, dashing Ser Imry, and witty Ser Erren, about such subjects such as fashion, music, and poetry when most young lords cared only for hunting, hawking, or jousting (which were polite for dinner. The other subjects of interest such as gambling, drinking, and whoring were definitely not brought up in polite society). Tyrion found it hilarious that the sly advice of Alekyne and the young Florent men recommending less fabric and therefore the tightening of skirts was being more or less ignored as superfluous ladies talk.

And then bold Marielle asked that the Florents demonstrate and teach the Foxtrot to them. Tyrion looked with alarm at his father, but Alekyne gracefully asked Aunt Genna if she approved. Aunt Genna must have been feeling mischievous and amused by Tywin’s barely hidden suspicious disapproval of such goings on, because she parried with inquiring as to whom Alekyne would choose to teach and demonstrate the dance with first.

“Why you, august Lady Genna Lannister of Casterly Rock. Far be it for me to ignore precedence!”

Aunt Genna’s eyes narrowed, taking Alekyne’s measure. Tyrion raised his eyebrows; he understood that Alekyne definitely did not want to encourage any of his lady cousins at this juncture, but had not thought he would choose this route.

Aunt Genna stood up and grandly sailed forth, her bulk moving with the assurance of a war galley on the sea, ignoring the discomfited mutterings of her husband Emmon. Alekyne and Erren stood up and moved to a clear space within the dining hall. Erren stood beside Genna and showed her the ladies’ steps while Alekyne slowly demonstrated the mens’ steps. Tyrion watched as his lady cousins all pursed their lips and pouted when Alekyne reached out with assurance and took Aunt Genna’s hand and placed his left hand just underneath her shoulder blade while she put her hand upon his shoulder. Tyrion wasn’t expecting Aunt Genna’s rumbling giggle, but he didn’t miss the shifting of his uncles watching.

Alekyne and Erren were correctly polite as they guided Aunt Genna through the steps. She did not coquettishly pretend clumsiness or inability to follow instructions; she was perfectly well a dancer and court ornament in her day. Alekyne guided her up the hall.

“Imry!” he called out. “Rhythm, please!”

Imry nodded and instead of clapping out a beat as everybody expected, took up two soup spoons in one hand and began beating out a rhythm with them. Tyrion grinned at his skill and he noticed that everybody raised their eyebrows at this unexpected talent. The clink of the spoons rang out clearly in the hall and Alekyne and Aunt Genna were gliding together back

down the hall, doing pivots and rollaways, to her evident delight. When they got to the end, Alekyne and Erren switched off and Aunt Genna went up and down with Erren.

Tyrion smiled, seeing that his Aunt was enjoying herself and that the dance suited her very much; she had ceased dancing as she grew fat, knowing that the sight of her attempting to skip and hop would be seen as shamefully ridiculous. Here, she was graceful again. When they came back down the hall, Erren slowed enough to spin her under his arm and Imry ended the rhythm. Erren and Alekyne bowed and Aunt Genna curtsied with aplomb and enough people were giving applause that Tyrion felt confident enough to join in.

That evening after that particular dinner was the most fun Tyrion had in a long while. Uncle Gerion of course stood up to learn this new dance, knowing that it would tweak his eldest brother's nose and where Gerion went on such matters, Tygett went too. The two brothers danced with their sister in turn and they looked very well doing so.

Tygett's wife was quickly persuaded to learn and from there, more and more of the married couples stood up to learn. After an hour, Uncle Gerion learned enough to want to indulge his unhappily sitting out maiden nieces and cousins. Alekyne cannily stayed teaching the married Lannister ladies while Ser Colin very gallantly stood up with Tyrion's single female relatives to teach them. Eventually Erren was led by Aunt Genna to one or another of these single cousins; as a second son of a third son, he was certainly in much less danger of entanglement.

Imry remained at his seat, beating out a rhythm and singing songs suitable for the foxtrot. Tyrion went to sit next to him, clapping along. Eventually, he must have had enough drink to not feel too embarrassed when Alekyne offered to teach him how to do the dance. Tyrion protested at first; surely he was ill-suited for any dance with his too short legs. He was never taught any of the traditional dances as a consequence; the idea of him trying to keep up with skipping and chassé steps was too ridiculous. At feasts, he ate and he drank. That's just what he was allowed to do. And of course, Father would never countenance ridiculousness in a Lannister. But Aunt Genna, indomitable and great, very firmly nearly picked him up from his chair to go through the steps.

He gamely followed the instructions and clasped both of Aunt Genna's hands with his own. He couldn't put a hand on her waist or hip; that was surely unseemly. He didn't expect much as he stepped forth, trying to do as Alekyne advised and steer Aunt Genna. But... they weren't doing awfully. Aunt Genna was a good dancer and kept her steps brief to match his stride and paid attention to his hands pushing and pulling. Huh. They were dancing!

He tried pushing with both hands and they succeeded in a rollaway. He tried again and they did it again, each letting go and spinning and meeting each other again to the beat, holding hands again.

"I'm dancing!" Tyrion exclaimed, laughing.

"I knew you could do anything you put your mind to!" Aunt Genna laughingly beamed down at him.

They made a full circle of the dining hall and Aunt Genna was forced to sit down, fanning herself and flushed from the exercise. Tyrion sat down too, next to her.

“I like these Florents,” Aunt Genna said. “Such fun, amusing fellows! Mayhap I should speak with your father and try for catching one of them for your cousins! What do you think?”

Tyrion imagined any of his friends joining him in his lab and allowed himself that dream of fun and discovery and laughter for a few seconds. But only a few seconds; he knew that the idea of any of them being chained to the Rock and beholden to his father’s disapproval would be disastrous. Unless it was Alekyne; as heir, he could conceivably be safe at Brightwater Keep. But Alekyne could hardly want someone like Lord Tywin as good-kin. The gold of the Lannister mines lose their luster when weighed against the influence of the Old Lion.

“I think Father is wary,” Tyrion tilted his chin significantly. “Of their impertinence and newfangled ways. If they are scheming for position in the Reach as everybody says and thinks-”

“He would not want to do anything to clearly show support or sanction as a marriage joining our Houses. Bah. What inconvenience!” Aunt Genna muttered to herself. “That Alekyne ought to be snapped up, the sooner the better! He’s so charming, so eloquent! He dances so well! One practically forgets his ears when he smiles at you. And such a smile!”

“I suspect Father would say that they smile too much,” Tyrion patted Aunt Genna’s arm.

“No less dangerous for it,” Aunt Genna lowered her voice. “Men always think scowls and frowns show power. But the most dangerous are the smiling ones, who charm and make you at ease. That’s when they stick the knife in your back, when you least expect. They feel like dangerous men. Are they, dear nephew? Am I right, or am I right?”

Tyrion thought back on the letters he received, of jokes about Selyse’s rules for social engagement: Be polite. Be professional. Have a plan to kill every single person you ever meet. He thought on Alekyne’s work with his steel wheeled bow, how once he perfected it, he was going to make crossbows equally deadly. He thought on Imry, who had fast hands deft for drumming and playing the flute, which also meant that he was faster than a famed Dornish viper with a dagger. He thought on Erren, so skilled with chemicals and therefore, poisons. They all had silent gaits, were plain faced when they weren’t smiling, could assume accents at will, and were comfortable conversing with high born and smallfolk alike. They stood out or blended in, as they chose. They were so obviously harmless at first glance, unless one knew them. Like himself, a friend, and then they revealed just enough to become... worrisomely disconcerting. He had never met lordlings the like.

“You are right,” Tyrion nodded. “What will you do, Aunt Genna?”

“I shall do nothing,” Aunt Genna said. “It is surely none of my business. But do be careful of having such for friends. They are exciting, no doubt. But if they turn upon your father-”

“They are not so foolish!” Tyrion urgently whispered. “Don’t say such a thing!”

“Yes, that would be crazy, wouldn’t it,” Aunt Genna picked up an abandoned glass of wine off the table and took a drink. “Crazy like a fox.”

King's Landing: Family Gain

Renly sat in Stannis' lap, hugging him very hard. He was surely too old for such hugs normally, but as Stannis was looking terrifying and grinding his teeth louder than usual, Renly thought it best. At the least, Stannis would have to actually work to pry him off before charging at the door of Selyse's birthing chamber.

Selyse gave Renly a tour during the Greyjoy Rebellion. He knew by now that it soothed Selyse to talk and have somebody listening to her as she explained some thing or another. She spoke of finding the most experienced midwife out of Fleabottom; for if such a woman could successfully guide poor smallfolk women and prevent them from perishing of birthing bed fever in the dirty hovels of Pisswater Bend, surely she would be successful in the scrupulously clean environs of the Foxhole. And clean was the byword for her birthing chamber. Renly was sure that it would always smell slightly of vinegar and soap.

The pregnancy was also a good time, in Selyse's opinion, to give the sex education presentation. Renly, Omer, and Merrell were trapped in the classroom along with Delena while Selyse drew mortifying diagrams on the chalkboard. Renly's pride kept him from squirming too much, though he blushed awfully while Delena asked follow up questions. He did so envy how Omer was not one to blush. Merrell wasn't disinterested, but he was young enough to find it all something that had very little to do with him personally and it made Renly blush even more to hear him repeating 'vagina' or 'glans' under his breath after Selyse wrote the proper labels on her diagrams. He could not help it; for logically, that diagram of the male member must be... based off of his own brother. He did not know how Selyse could be so dispassionate and teacher-ly about the subject. He did wish he had her sort of poise.

There is no proper bed within the birthing chamber. Selyse was adamant that she'll not have some mattress filled with unclean feathers. There is a metal contraption, which Renly thinks looks like a most uncomfortable interpretation of a chair or bed, bolted against one wall, with rails. There was only a cotton sheets covering it, giving it no padding at all, really. There is a table with stacks of very clean cloths for the blood.

They were waiting now. Stannis arrived back at the Foxhole very unexpectedly indeed, changing horses along the Gold Road, set on being by her side, for ill or otherwise. Renly saw them in the Foxhole courtyard, with him embracing her so tightly about the shoulders, standing to her side so that he would not be in the way of her bulging belly, and her holding on to him just as tightly, kissing with abandon. Renly wrinkled his nose at the memory of such an open display. It was a little embarrassing; certainly he'd never seen such demonstrative behavior among any couples when he lived at Storm's End. It wasn't really a Stormlander way. Reachers were more flirtatious and courtly, Renly had learned, giving hand kisses and the like and everybody was ready with a compliment on a moment's notice.

He didn't think Stannis would approve and that he'd dismiss it with a sniff about frivolity and dishonesty. But with Selyse it was completely different. It couldn't be helped because his brother and his wife were the rarest of highborn couples; in love and somehow between the two of them ravenous lovers. Renly thought that as embarrassing as that was, it was a better

thing than Robert and Cersei's marriage, at least. He wasn't stupid and he'd learned properly from Omer and Merrell how to be quiet and to take advantage of their currently short heights to keep observations; his eldest brother quarreled so much with his wife when Renly first stayed at the Red Keep that it frightened him in the beginning.

Stannis admonished Selyse most strongly upon his return about her walking about during the advanced stage of her pregnancy, but she scoffed at him and told him that different women had different pregnancies. Renly had overheard from the other women within the Foxhole that Selyse was unusually robust during her pregnancy. She had the morning sickness, yes, but she also consumed boiled eggs, hard cheeses, lean meats, all sorts of pickled vegetables, and fish voraciously in addition to her usual dark salad greens, which fueled her energies. She kept up her walking, taking circuits within the Foxhole itself with a slower pace.

She commissioned a new cradle and a new kind of chair, with legs attached to what looked like bows; a rocking chair. Renly had never seen the like. It was rather fun to sit and rock in it and the furniture maker was sure that there would be others who would like such a chair if other examples were made.

Stannis had no more than two days to calm down before he was grinding his teeth with worry again and Renly was acting as a human weight on his lap; Selyse's labor pains began at lunch this day.

"Oh. Ow. Motherfucker," her fork halting in midair.

Such was Selyse's response, not even a cry of pain really. Renly thought it a little anticlimactic.

She had stood up and very firmly called out instructions; Maester Willis and Midwife Alys were to prep for the birthing room. Her mother, Lady Samantha, and her aunt Rosamund, and Cousin Delena may be present if they chose. Of course they chose. Her handmaid Megga would also be present if she chose. Of course she chose. Selyse looked back and grasped Stannis' hand once and then walked away from him, escorted by Megga for the birthing chamber.

The silence from behind the shut door was unnerving. Renly heard tell there would be screaming. Shouldn't there be screaming?

"It'll be hours yet," Ser Davos said from where he was sitting next to them.

"Really?" Renly asked.

"Aye. Best distract yourself while you wait."

Well. Ser Davos would know; he was a father many times over. And the experience was shown by Davos whittling away at a block of wood.

Renly lifted his head from Stannis' shoulder to look at Stannis.

"Want to play a game of Mere?"

“... No.”

“Would you like for me to read you a story?” Renly finally asked.

Stannis finally nodded and Renly ran off to his chambers to retrieve a stack of books. He came back with Omer and Merrell. They were solemnly lurking in the hallway, interested in the event of the birth and also concerned for their cousin. Renly started off by reading James and the Giant Peach. His voice became dry and servants were called to give him a pitcher of lemon water so that he could continue. He follows up with Princess Mononoke, Brave Princess Merida, Prince Bambi, the Lion King, Frozen, Martin the Warrior, and is in the middle of Fantastic Mr. Fox when they hear Selyse cry out loud enough to hear from behind the door.

Stannis leaps up and there is no way he can be distracted now.

The door opens and Megga pokes her head out.

“She’s wanting you, my lord,” she urgently says. “Do scrub in vinegar and change into the smocks. Hurry.”

One of the midwife’s apprentices comes out with a pitcher and wash basin of vinegar. Davos helps Stannis out of his jacket and shirt. The apprentice quickly wets a washcloth in the vinegar and starts vigorously scrubbing on Stannis’ exposed skin as he dunks his hands into the vinegar and starts washing his hands.

Renly stands, wrinkling his nose at the smell, fear tightening in his gut.

Stannis dons a clean smock and rushes in. Davos stays back, but the door is left ajar and nobody seems to be aware as Renly, Omer, and Merrell line up and poke their heads in to watch.

Selyse is in a smock of her own and standing in the middle of the room, her legs and bottom bare. Renly had not expected that.

“Selyse! What are you doing standing!” Stannis barks at her.

“Shut the fuck up, I’ll stand because I feel like it!” Selyse growls at him and makes a terrible grimace. “Fuck! There’s another contraction!”

She reaches for Stannis and he goes to her, holding her up while she clutches at his shoulders and leans on him, and Renly can see her taking measured deep breaths.

The midwife is crouched along with Maester Willis, staring up at Selyse between her legs and it’s the oddest thing.

“Give me the dilation!” Selyse cries out.

Renly gaped when the midwife reached out and put her fingers in there! And then the midwife guided Maester Willis’ hand and he put his fingers in there!

“Not yet, milady!” Midwife Alys replies.

Selyse huffs and nods.

“What’s going on?” Stannis says. “Is something wrong?”

Selyse shakes her head.

“I must not push until the opening is wide enough for the baby’s head. I push too soon, I will tear.”

“Lie down,” Stannis tries again.

“No, I need the baby to move down from gravity, I need-”

Selyse groans.

“Dilation!” she demands for another check again.

“Same!”

“Shit-”

Selyse’s mother is standing behind Stannis, holding one of Selyse’s hands, making nonsense comforting noises.

“My strong Selyse, you are doing so well, my good girl, my strong girl-”

“Water!” Selyse cries out and her cousin Delena stands ready with a cup for her to sip from.

She huffs through more contractions. They wait.

“My lady, dilation at four inches,” Maester Willis actually has a measuring rod in his hand, looking fascinated and queasy. This is the first time he’s witnessed a birth from all his training at the Citadel.

“Finally-” Selyse groans.

“What-” Stannis says.

“Shut up and breathe with me!”

Selyse shifts her stance, planting her feet firmly and gives out a great shout.

Renly felt terribly ill and his heart feels like it could burst out of his chest as Selyse yells and whimpers. Her sounds don’t stop and her agony terrifies him.

“Lie down!” Stannis tries again, tries to move.

“FUCK YOU!” Selyse howls. “I DO WHAT I WANT!”

“Breathe! Breathe!” her aunt and mother chant. “Breathe!”

“I see the head!” calls out Midwife Alys. “Push, milady, push!”

“Head!?” Selyse wails.

“Head!” Alys and Willis respond.

“Gods, it’s purple!” Delena cries out from where she has circled around to see.

“That’s normal!” Alys quickly says at Stannis’ dreadful look.

“Push!”

“Breathe!”

Selyse screams again, bracing her forehead against Stannis’ shoulder.

“Push, milady, push!”

Renly can’t see anything else really with all the adults crowding around.

“MOTHERFUCKER!” Selyse howls.

Her legs shake and she seems about to topple, if it were not for Stannis holding her up. Selyse struggles for words and eventually, they are kneeling together on the floor, the metal chair-bed ignored all together.

“Selyse!” Stannis urgently says to her, at a loss to say something more useful. “Selyse!”

“Shoulders now, milady!” Alys calls out. “Shoulders! Once more, milady! Push! Push!”

A thin wail pierces the air and Renly nearly vomits. It can cry while coming out!? Nobody told him of this!

Selyse huffs and puffs and screams.

“Catch it!” Maester Willis nervously commands. “It’s coming, it’s coming!”

He needn’t have called out so; Alys has both hands cupped somewhere between Selyse’s thighs, blocked from Renly’s view.

“Breathe!”

“Push!”

“Oh, milady!” Alys cheers. “Oh, milady!”

Alys rises from her crouch and there is a bloody shape in her hands.

Selyse finally allows herself to be guided to the metal chair-bed as the most important part has passed. Midwife Alys, Maester Wilis and the apprentices bustle about, calling out the instructions for the cord to be tied off and cut, to wait for the afterbirth to pass, to wipe down the crying baby.

“My lord,” Maester Willis pronounces, after Alys wraps the baby securely in clean swaddling. “You have a son.”

Selyse reaches out to hold the baby and she has nothing to say, grinning and grinning.

Stannis blinks at the small, wrinkled face peeping out of the blanket and laughs. He collapses to sit on a chair next to Selyse and laughs and laughs, desperately relieved. Selyse looks at him, her eyes bright and Stannis’ sudden loss of tension is such that all he can do is lean over and butt his head against her shoulder, his guffaws becoming huffs of breath.

Renly has never heard the like before. He didn’t think Stannis was able to laugh.

Selyse’s mother was wiping relieved tears from her face, leaning over the other side and kissed Selyse on her forehead. Her aunt did the same.

Eventually, the people notice that he and Omer and Merrell are at the door and they are allowed in along with Davos to properly see the baby.

They arrange themselves next to where Selyse is resting, holding and murmuring to the baby.

“What is his name?” Renly finally asks.

“Yeah,” says Merrell.

“I like Armand,” Selyse softly said.

Renly looked at Stannis, hopefully.

“Armand Baratheon,” Stannis murmurs, trying the name out loud. “Yes. Let him be named that.”

“Hello, Armand,” Renly bounces on the balls of his feet, happy. “I’m your Uncle Renly!”

A flurry of ravens get sent off with the news and in a few days, Midwife Alys assures Selyse she is strong enough to receive visitors, so long as she remains in bed. Lady Arryn arrives quickly, laughing with watery eyes from Selyse’s success. She cooed over the baby and Selyse softly suggests that perhaps when Lysa is pregnant again that she could give her the notes she made during her own pregnancy. It is all in the hands of the gods, but maybe- And Lysa nodded immediately.

It is now, in privacy, that Lysa asks about potential consequences from a too large dose of moontea. Selyse has years of controlling her expression to use as she carefully asks for the

details. Lysa reveals her feelings for one Petyr Baelish and the circumstances of her first pregnancy.

“I thought- I thought if I told Father he would allow us to wed-”

“My dear, life is not a song,” Selyse’s voice is soft with sympathy. “Your father- I am most sorry to say, is- a real hard asshole-”

Lysa laughs through her fresh tears over the memory.

“I did not think I would be happy. Catelyn is Lady of Winterfell like she always wanted, with a young husband, a mother of the heir and more besides!”

Lysa wipes her eyes.

“Queen Cersei was cruel and mocking and though Lord Arryn is a kind, honorable man-”

“He has gray hair and his breath was stank,” Selyse finishes.

Lysa giggles at her shocking frankness, used to it by now.

“He is much better now,” Lysa says. “After you got Lord Stannis to advise him to use a toothbrush and make changes to his diet. And I do care for him much more. And I am so glad that I have met you and your family!”

Selyse’s own mother and aunt have taken Lysa under their wings and as Lysa had only the barest of memories of her own mother, she hungrily received their caring and love, following their lead. They are more traditional than the daring Selyse and the young Florents, which was comforting. But at the same time, she has learned that they had little use for the romantic and soft notions of songs and poetry that she and Catelyn overindulged in with Lord Hoster’s permission.

For though the young Florents have composed and perform all sorts of pretty love songs, their stories are more grisly, more full of betrayals, lies, backstabblings, even kinslaying in the case of stories like the Lion King. Lysa feels like it might have done her some good if there were stories of the like at Riverrun; she feels like she ought to have expected her own father to care more for the gains to House Tully by marrying her off to House Arryn than to a poor lordly House as Baelish.

She also realises that Petyr is not as special as she once thought. She has sat with Selyse, Rhea, and Delena in the past with the Royce girls and they frankly gossiped and discussed the men they fancied while visiting the Foxhole. While the Royce girls gushed at Alekyne’s seat on a horse and the flex of his arms during archery practice, the Florent girls would exchange amused, faintly mocking glances. She knows now that the Royce girls did not show themselves well by failing to note that Alekyne had tried to engage with them with riddles or storytelling, with games playing that sought to look for some mathematical ability or cleverness. She remembers well that unlike in Riverrun, where her Father cared only for skill at arms such as displayed by Uncle Brynden and how the household knights and squires and

Edmure all laughed at Petyr's lack of skill at arms, that the Florents had no such thoughts. It is proven by how the young Florent men have turned out.

All the young Florent men were witty, clever, cunning in turn as well as having beautiful singing voices. Lysa has allowed herself to secretly treasure the flutter in her heart when she watched Alekyne strut and croon through his songs, dreaming that he was singing about her. To her. It was not to be, of course. Alekyne is honorable and though he may kiss her hand in greeting he certainly never went beyond that. He would certainly never shame her, let alone himself, or their respective Houses. She admires that about the Florents; they value family as well as any Tully. She also knows that as kind as Alekyne is, she is not so nimble of mind or so educated that they would suit. She cannot argue and debate like the Florent ladies. She knows now that Petyr is just one of a certain type of man that you could find in Westeros if you tried. What's more, none of the Florent men were dismissive of her; they always chose her to play with them on their team for Pictionary and they were always happy to play Mere with her. She knows now that Petyr was merely tolerant of her presence so long as Catelyn was near too.

She has even almost forgotten the sting of Petyr calling her Cat that night she gave him her maidenhead. Selyse had gasped on her behalf, indignant at his behavior when she told her what happened. She had not thought it noteworthy, but Selyse had clutched her hand and said she deserves a man who would not call her another woman's name. And for it to be her sister! How awful, Selyse sympathetically said. Why, Selyse is quite sure that Petyr was toying with her affections and perhaps even laughing at her love of him! Lysa had not thought of it like that, but now that she has, she sees the sense of it. If he truly loved her, Selyse pointed out, he ought to have approached her father first and spoke to him of betrothal himself! Even if he was a minor lord, he ought to have been willing to go through the expected protocol. In fact, he had the temerity to write her a letter, asking for a good word from her to Jon about a position within the Vale! The nerve of that man, he certainly never wrote a letter to her before and everybody knew she would be in King's Landing with her husband! How dare he claim to treasure their friendship and past together in Riverrun. Friendship, indeed! User, player, just like Selyse said! Well, she's done being a dupe, first him, her father, she'll never, never!

That letter was thrown into the hearth fire with no reply.

Lysa knows that Selyse knows what it is like to be overlooked. Lysa comes to her conclusion that Selyse has cultivated her singing, musicality with instruments, and skill at dance precisely because she is so much plainer than her lady cousins. And obviously, her fashion for tight skirts was to attract attention away from her large Florent ears and small bust! Lysa envies the self-possession and stubbornness that Selyse must have had as a little girl to refuse to allow her cousins to outshine her. She didn't have that spiritedness herself, so she is very glad that Selyse has befriended her and encourages her so much. Why, she cares so much more than Catelyn ever did! Catelyn only cared about big, handsome, cruel Brandon Stark! Catelyn only cared about being Lady of Winterfell! Catelyn was the beauty of the family! Catelyn, Catelyn, Catelyn! How she is sick of dear, beautiful, lovely Catelyn!

Ever since Lord Stannis has so usefully, with his graceless bluntness, informed her husband on how to be much more pleasing in presence to her, she can see how good a husband he is.

Jon is not her ideal husband; for he cannot make her sigh over his appearance with his age. But they kiss more and it is pleasing. He has wonderful manners and he certainly never shouts at her. He has learned how to be a good husband to his first wives and she reaps the benefits of his experience in the matter. She has seen how King Robert and Queen Cersei are disrespectful of each other in public and it is a disgrace she is glad is not her lot. She likes that he dances the foxtrot with her; as the gliding movements are easy for a man of his age. It is romantic. Why, he even compliments her. Certainly, he has more skill at it than poor Lord Stannis, who has no graceful manners and words. She is glad that Selyse is so in love and suiting with Lord Stannis, for a man like that terrifies Lysa and more than once Selyse has had to scold him for causing her to burst into nervous tears with one of his rude statements. Selyse is so kind to her.

In the end, Lysa is prompted to seek out the expertise of Midwife Alys. She changes her diet from the usual too rich fare of the Red Keep, she stops drinking much alcohol in favor of boiled teas and tisanes, and she starts exercising with Selyse. The poses on the floor that the Florent ladies practice in the privacy of their chambers were embarrassing at first, but Lysa cannot deny the mounting strength of her midsection that came from those repetitive leg lifts. Anything at all might help. Selyse and Midwife Alys have even quietly told her that perhaps unfortunately that Lord Arryn's own seed might be at fault; she is his third wife after all and if he could not father living children on those previous ladies during his prime, the pattern must not be ignored. Lysa's worries ease from this. Of course, why hadn't she thought of that? She would try for an heir with all her might, but if her husband's seed was no good in the first place, it didn't matter how fertile the soil was.

She laughs to herself when Lord and Lady Baratheon formally present their son to court and Queen Cersei has the condescension to give advice to Lady Selyse on how to be a mother! She is sure that Prince Joffrey's neverending tantrums and screams of No-! in response to everything is the sign of a spoiled brat. Perhaps Lord and Lady Baratheon do not want blind obedience from their children (unlike her own father, Lysa bitterly thinks) but for sure she knows that screaming unreasonable behavior will not be tolerated. Why, dear, sweet little Merrell as the youngest Florent gives a glimpse of the skills the Florents have in raising sons! To say nothing of how well Alekyne the heir turned out or Imry and Erren!

Lady Melessa Tarly was overjoyed at the news of Selyse's successful delivery and made the journey to the Foxhole herself, bringing her son Samwell and daughter Talla with her. Lysa is glad to reacquaint herself with this Florent cousin and make much of the Tarly children.

Samwell had cowered behind his mother's skirt upon seeing Lord Stannis, despite the fact that he wasn't frowning on purpose. Lord Stannis was not aloof, however, having become used to the Florent boys and having a younger brother besides; he knelt down to reintroduce himself and Samwell came out to make a bow. Samwell was a chubby, shy little boy, who still sucked his thumb and was overwhelmed by the attention of the Fox Pack. They drew him out with stories, knock knock jokes, and nonsense songs and he began to laugh and shortly afterwards trailed after them in play, despite crying occasionally when he tripped and fell on his face. Merrell took to Samwell quite immediately, finally having somebody younger than him about that he could impress and very kindly waited out Sam's tears and

always held his hand out to him and comforted him with hugs. It quite melted Lysa's heart to see.

Melessa frankly recounted her fights with Lord Tarly about Samwell to Selyse and the other women in the sewing room. When he bellowed at her about so called coddling, she tried to be a gracious, courteous lady in response at first, but in the end she confessed that she had taken her lung power from following Selyse's habit of jogging up and down bailey towers and keeping up her singing practice to good use and bellowed back like a fishwife, to his shock.

"I always said he deserved no less," Selyse muttered as she ran through scales on her dulcimer. "Old goat."

Melessa was firmly resistant to Randyll's ideas that taking the time to read to Samwell in the evenings and singing to him was coddling. She also exerted her control over the servants of Horn Hill by having any number of servants constantly aware of Sam's whereabouts whenever he was taken out of the nursery. She always did think that Selyse, Imry, and Erren were much too apt to be sensationally paranoiac after inventing the Assassin's Creed stories, but she was no fool; trust but verify.

She had to drop everything and rush to Sam's rescue from his father's foolishness; that time when he threw her poor boy into the pond! Why, she had to jump in after her son, risking her skirts sinking her down! But anger gave her strength and she fetched Sam up. Her fury was ice cold then; no fishwife bellowing. Randyll had blustered, but Melessa silently thrust her hand at his face and disdainfully flicked it, dismissing him and his protests about her interference. He stomped off when Melessa refused to leave first, cradling Sam close.

That evening when he retired to his chambers, he woke up in the middle of the night in terror by the sight of Melessa standing at the foot of his bed, her face baleful in the moonlight. He was sure that he had locked the door before going to sleep.

"You must think," Melessa's tone was sickly sweet. "That only the Florent boys can get past locks. Didn't you, dearest, darling, husband?"

He sputtered.

"Don't make me truly angry, Randyll. You'll not have a chance to scream. Savvy?"

She put her rusty sneaking skills to use and more than once in the subsequent days Randyll Tarly yelped in fear as his wife would appear at his shoulder at odd intervals during the day no matter where he was in the keep, an implacable, angry ghost. Watching him.

It was absolutely ridiculous that he wanted to push Sam past his abilities as a six year old little boy! Why, she does have younger male cousins, after all! She remembers how they were! She argued with Randyll about it, resolutely wearing him down; was he truly going to question her methods, given how well Alekyne turned out? Given how well Imry and Erren, Omer and Merrell are showing? Did he want his own son to be as ignorant as those hill tribes of the Vale!? How was he to manage the mills without knowing his mathematics!? Did he wish for the wealth of Horn Hill, a boon of her dowry, to be pissed and swindled away? Did he!?

Lord Randyll Tarly was most displeased and terrified in equal measure. He was entirely unprepared for the ferocity of his wife in her anger or her arguing. For Melessa Tarly was normally a relentlessly cheerful woman; she did not trouble herself to trouble him to be more civil than his usual wont and did not attempt any such chiding or nagging that he had expected to endure upon entering the married state. It was one of the reasons why he had put off getting married for so long; so many of his fellow lords told him often enough that though marriage was of course essential to Houses, it was often an ill upon former bachelors. He had become entirely dependent and accustomed to the efficient running of Horn Hill and the graciousness of his lady wife. He had even, in his limited capacity for the softer emotions, become fond of her. He had thought that the troubling, troublesome tendencies of the male Florents were somehow moderated by her being a woman. He was sorely incorrect and he had not a single diplomatic bone in his body that would suggest apologizing first.

So he spent the next few days uneasy and chagrined at the absence of Melessa's formerly ready smiles to him, missing her sweet songs after dinners, and how she barred him from her chambers in the evenings. Yet he was stubborn in his insistence that he had not done anything wrong with his treatment of his son!

And then, Melessa changed the rules of their marriage again. She reached back for the tactics of Florys the Fox, the tales that the Florent women passed on to each other and not necessarily to the Florent men. Keep them unbalanced, distracted. And then, spring the honeypot trap.

Melessa also confessed that she dared take Selyse's advice and tricked Lord Randyll with dares on the results of a game of Mere; he was to obey all her commands for one night, on his honor. He only saw a chance to interact with her while she smiled at him again. He thought that her seemingly good mood was a sign of smoothing things over. She then ruthlessly unleashed all her learned skills from the innumerable games she played while still a maid and beat him fairly. All the ladies, even Selyse, shrieked with laughter when Melessa revealed that she made him apologize and demanded that he submit to her for punishment. He turned red at her trickery and Melessa thought he would dismiss her and stomp away, but he scrunched his face up like Samwell did after a rebuke and mumbled an apology. Here, she is triumphant; he needs her. He's lost without her. He will not admit so out loud, but words are wind. That he stays is all she needed. Subsequently she trussed him up with cords and set upon his bare buttocks with a riding crop. Lysa was most shocked when Melessa declared that she then told Lord Randyll that she would not release him until he succeeded in satisfying her with his mouth. He cursed at her for that, but she whipped his buttocks some more and he did it.

"Really? He did it? He licked up your custard pie?" Selyse quirked her brow saucily.

"Custard pie!" Delena shrieked, laughing.

"I made him get on his knees. So there," Melessa said proudly. "Took him long enough."

"Whoo, girl," Selyse drawled. "He must be so mad. How are you still alive and kicking?"

"Apparently an old warhorse like my husband takes to the whip. He was most roused," Melessa quirked her eyebrow significantly. "He had miles to go, so I rode him until he was in

a lather.”

Selyse snickered. Lysa was blushing at the idea of it all; it was so exciting, so shocking.

“Ah, so the man likes some pain in bed, does he? Figures,” Selyse said sagely. “He let you do it again?”

“Hmmm,” Melessa made one of those shifty looks that was so charming from the Florent men. “He’s suddenly very enthusiastic about playing games of Mere after dinner.”

They cackled at that.

“Selyse, you must share something too. A tale for a tale, like you’ve always said. I know you worry about Stannis’ need for privacy, but is there not anything you may say...”

“I did not need a horsewhip to have him enjoying some custard pie,” Selyse grinned.

All the Florent ladies whooped while Lysa giggled nervously.

When they had to gather for dinner altogether next, Lysa rued her redheaded complexion; she blushed most obviously every time she had to look at Lord Stannis.

Melessa was very occupied running Horn Hill, the cotton and wool mills of Horn Hill, and coordinating with the Florent canning teams working on packaging up Horn Hill’s produce for export and the Royal Fleet; she worried that Sam was truly being neglected rather than coddled; there were no boys like the Florent boys at Horn Hill and no matter how many repetitions of their childhood stories or attempts to have him follow her as she made her rounds, Sam could not be seen hanging off her skirts all the time. The men of Horn Hill who he would be lord over did not respect such a sight; she was astute enough to discern the reality of it.

There was no good solution except that everybody agreed that Sam would do much better at the Foxhole for a time.

Already, he was enjoying his lessons with Maester Willis and because of Merrell and Omer’s friendliness he was also for the first time taking an interest in outdoor games. Unlike the variants of King of the Hill or hitting each other with sticks that were the traditional boys’ games, Omer and Merrell enjoyed games like soccer one on one. Merrell spent hours teaching Sam to do a credible dribble. Without the fear of getting shoved, hit, or punched, Sam was willing to spend afternoons running about to chase the ball and attempting to make goals. When it was his turn to be goalie, he was already no longer bursting into tears from the impact of the straw-stuffed leather ball to his body. He liked it so well that Uncle Alekyne gifted him with his very own stitched leather ball, dyed in his House colors of red and green. As he was younger, his lessons ended earlier than Omer or Merrell. He spent his free time alone practicing, kicking and bouncing the ball off walls, dribbling up and down hallways, while singing new Florent songs to himself.

His smiling Uncle Alekyne and Cousin Imry impressed him very much. For though they trained with arms in the yard and his mother insisted that he spend some time watching, they

were not at all frightening, unlike his father. Imry taught him how to properly fall and tumble so that he could rise back on his feet quickly from being shoved or hit during roughhousing. Alekyne showed him how to properly make a fist and throw a punch, while Imry held up his leather ball and Sam gamely punched at the leather. They never mocked him for missing the first few times or how weakly he did it. They assured him that they were all not so skilled in the beginning and that he had plenty of time to learn. He was a Tarly.

He was at first unhappy with what that could possibly mean. He was no strong hunter. However, Uncle Alekyne showed him his special steel wheeled bow and how fun it was to shoot at targets. He even let Sam try pulling at the string, amazed at how he could not even get it to budge. They made a little wooden bow for him in the workshop of the Foxhole and Sam was encouraged to learn how to shoot. Omer and Merrell knew how to do so already. It was yet another thing for him to join in on; they were always so ready to cheer him on that he had no embarrassment over his arrows falling short the first times. After a time, he hit the center of the target and they cheered so loudly that he blushed and laughed at their ridiculousness.

Lord Renly was friendly as well; joining in with soccer or table games and Sam trusted him almost immediately for Omer and Merrell were friends with him first. Sam thought well of Lord Stannis. He had thought Lord Stannis would be mean like Father, but it was not so. He only looked very stern because his face was just like that. Lord Stannis complimented him on his advanced vocabulary for a boy his age and Sam puffed up at that. Lord Stannis went about with a mysterious folio filled with papers and was often taking notes in his notebook like the Florents. He read by a hearth fire in the evenings, and he was very important; Master of Ships! Sam was quite awed, seeing Lord Stannis conferring with all sorts of rough looking captains and intimidating Royal Marines, ordering them to do this or that with his serious voice. Father said that other lords who wasted time reading and sitting about weren't strong lords at all, but it couldn't be so, for Lord Stannis won battles for the King during the Greyjoy Rebellion, hadn't he, and commanded fighting men of the Royal Fleet! Sam even got to go the training yard of the Red Keep and see how Lord Stannis was one of the few who could regularly spar with the King, and he even sometimes won bouts! The King was so powerful and bellowed so fearsomely while merely sparring, he really must have been a Demon of the Trident during the Rebellion! Lord Stannis was big and strong! While reading and writing! Sam thought it would be wonderful to have a fancy folio of his own and a desk too, to do important, grown up reading and writing, so long as he did as Lord Stannis.

Cousin Lady Selyse was the most strange and wonderful. She told the funniest or scariest stories, she sang the most beautiful songs and her skill at the harp and dulcimer was the best he had ever heard. He would be tempted to say she was better at singing and making music than even his Mother, but she was his Mother and surely she was the best in the world! When Mother's Florent cousins sang together it was like magic and they would dance and laugh and it was wonderful. Even her little baby, wee cousin Armand was dear. Lady Selyse asked if he would help look after and protect Armand in the future. Sam had never thought that anybody would ask him for protection, but that was Lady Selyse for you. He promised that he would do his best to grow up to be a proper protector of his little cousin. He told her about how his father yelled at him for being fat. Selyse hugged him and said that perhaps he would always be their dear, stout, roly poly Sammy, but his shape didn't matter so much as what he could do; he was keeping up with his cousins in play, wasn't he? He wasn't getting out of breath so

much? Sam brightened at that. He was keeping up! She noticed! Selyse assured him that perhaps fewer tarts after dinner were appropriate, but it was better that he keep on keeping up. Once he was older, he ought to ask his Florent cousins about a weight-lifting regimen. Sam nodded. Cousin Selyse was very wise.

Unfortunately, his mother could only extend their visit to two moons and then they had to go back to Horn Hill. Sam wept at the idea, but then Omer and Merrell convinced their mother and father that they should like to visit Horn Hill for themselves. To say nothing of showing him Brightwater Keep, please, please? Alekyne was fully able to oversee the Foxhole himself. And so his Great Uncle Ser Colin and Great Aunt Rosamund with Delena, Omer, and Merrell were to escort him to Brightwater Keep to visit with Grandfather and Grandmother Florent for a few moons and then onward to Horn Hill. They could probably stay on for moons afterwards. Sam felt well about that. Near a year with his cousins!

Grandfather and Grandmother Florent were wonderful, as it turned out. Grandmother Florent always had cookies in a jar in her rooms for him if he could demonstrate a juggle of his soccer ball at least five times or more. Grandfather Florent was warm and not at all angry all the time like his father. He spoke so easily and clearly about the duties of being a lord that Sam started to understand what it meant to be an heir and was not intimidated by the prospect. He allowed Sam to sit next to him in his solar reading while he worked on raven messages or to watch him as he listened to petitions. They toured the cotton and wool mills and tin jar factory and Sam was a little afraid at first to meet so many strangers, but he rallied and bowed each time. It would not do for him to be present for too long while Lord Florent held business meetings during the day, so he was allowed to go to the childrens' school on the property.

Grandfather and Grandmother Florent, since their own children were grown, were fostering a number of Reacher nobles' children. Sam had been very nervous about meeting the fosters but the boys that Grandfather accepted were like him; able to sit still to read and do their sums. Maester Bryan taught the noble children especially about deeper history and principles of sound management of holdings and politics of Westeros. Grandmother Florent took it upon herself to oversee courtly manners, table etiquette, and the hiring of music and dancing masters. She was also headmistress of the millworkers' children's schools for Brightwater Keep, Horn Hill, and even the far away schools associated with the iron works and shipyard in the Crownlands, forever receiving and sending off ravens. The rest of the time, fosters were to learn in class with smallfolk children about math, reading, and writing; a little model of the Citadel's own teaching principles. He did the school work as instructed, did not make a fuss or put on airs (as Lord Renly recommended) and he found out that they knew about soccer! He showed them his ball and they played a few games after lunches and it was quite fun! Sam had not thought he could have fun with boys that weren't Florents.

When it was time to face his father at Horn Hill, Sam felt that familiar quailing in his tummy that shamed him so, but he stood up straight and met his father's eyes because Omer and Merrell did so. What's more, he even noticed how his cousins even smiled at his father!

"Well met, Lord Randyll Tarly," Omer said.

"Yeah," Merrell added. "We trust you remember us?"

Lord Randyll growled at the cheek but as they were his guests and his wife's blood, he had to let it pass. He sighed and demanded to know what Sam was up to in the past moons. Reading? He sneered.

Sam didn't stutter when he said that he knew now how to properly shoot a bow and arrow. He was sure his father didn't care about how well he did at soccer; it was a child's game. His father sniffed and ordered that he should show him and if he thought he could get away with telling falsehoods, well, he'll tan Sam's hide.

Sam bowed and ran off to retrieve his little bow and quiver of arrows from his room. Omer and Merrell followed him to learn where the training yard of Horn Hill was and his father was waiting. His father took his bow from him and tested the pull on it. It must have met with his approval because he handed it back. The distance of a target was adjusted for the range of his bow.

Sam took his stance and took a deep breath.

'I'm a Tarly,' he thought to himself as he raised his bow and nocked. 'I've a good an eye as any boy and I'll feed myself from my own hunts if I have to. I'll hit the target like Princess Merida!'

He pulled and released in a smooth motion as Uncle Alekyne taught him and the arrow flew out and hit the target. Not perfectly on center of the bull's eye, but it was a fine shot. He lowered his bow and looked up at his father.

Lord Tarly said nothing, staring at the arrow at the mark.

"So you're useful for something at last, boy," he finally growled.

Sam noticed Omer and Merrell lurking at the edges of the yard and they both grinned their sharp grins at him, encouraging him to speak.

"I just needed better teachers, was all," Sam said. "Uncle Alekyne says I should try for hitting rabbits to start. And he taught me how to campfire cook them too when he took me out hunting in the Kingswood. They taste good with rosemary and thyme."

He was very squeamish the first time Uncle Alekyne took him out hunting (Florents had permission as good-kin to the King to hunt in the Kingswood) and he was shown how to properly skin and gut a rabbit for eating. Uncle Alekyne was very patient with his tears; after all, he explained, those meat pies he loved so much came from living things too. He had not thought of it before, but it was so. He paid attention then and very solemnly swore to give a firm killing blow to the animals he would hunt in the future and to not make a game of letting such creatures suffer just because they were fated to fill his belly.

Father scowled down at him some more until he was forced to lower his eyes.

"Don't think this will get you out of proper arms training, boy," Lord Randyll finally said.

Sam nodded, resigned. At least Omer and Merrell would teach him tricks on how to bear it and they wouldn't ever laugh at him unlike all the stupid squires and pages here in Horn Hill.

King's Landing: Stannis Considers

My memories of my past dimensional life were fading, sepia-toned whispers. The specifics were getting away from me. I knew it was inevitable; that was why I recorded so much in my notebooks as a child. The memories were freshest, though limited by that same childish immaturity, my first notebooks were scattershot and many notebooks were filled with song lyrics, recaps of movies and book plots, and day to day pop culture. It was slow going back then, trying to nail down other subjects. My current writing is a revisitation, trying to squeeze out more, refining the broad sketches into detailed component parts. The clumsy child-writing and then the Code hid my memories for my own purposes. These were the most top secret of notes, the ones that absolutely nobody would read except me. As it was, I cannot take for granted the absolute convenience of being a lady of nobility during this postpartum stage compared to my past as a working stiff, needing to worry about sleep deprivation and limited maternity leave on top of the pain of recovering.

I did not need to have a bassinet beside the bed for the late night feedings; it was on the hired nursemaids to keep vigil in the nursery overnight and for them to endure Armand's infant fussiness. I would be woken by one, while the other changed his dirty diapers as needed, and then he would be brought to me, clean and ready for a feeding. It was the done thing for nobles to have a wet nurse, but I adamantly argued that I would be feeding my own baby, thank you very much. Wasting the milk that I was producing naturally was just illogical. And of course, once I evoked that word everybody knew that it was the signal to shut up and let me have my way. Even Mother subsided though she fretted about how it was such a commoner sort of behavior to indulge in.

Poor Stannis was a grumpy customer for the first few nights of interrupted sleep. I tried to be as quiet as possible, as did the nursemaids, but he was nervous enough, fresh from battle, such that a shift of the mattress would have his eyes popping open in an instant. The first time, I had managed with the help of one nursemaid to get out of bed and was hobbling on the way to the sitting room, so that I could theoretically leave Stannis in peace by having candles lit there in order to see what I was doing out of his sight. He lurched upright, squinting at me from the dimming hearthfire light and brusquely demanded to know what was I thinking, moving about, I was on orders to stay put, bring the baby here if I was going to be stubborn about feeding it myself! There was no helping it. I did think if I resisted his demands further that he'd get up and physically bring me back to bed himself. So Armand was brought directly to me, hungry whimpering or straight up crying the way infants do, Stannis would make disgruntled huffing noises at each instance of waking up, but he would kiss me and Armand on the cheek and watched Armand feeding for a time, fascinated. He was afraid to even hold Armand at first, until I coached him precisely about supporting the head and that really, infants at this stage were obligingly immobile, especially while swaddled.

How I wished I had a camera! There was a moment where upon passing Armand to Stannis that the two of them mutually scowled at each other; Stannis worried about breaking Armand somehow and Armand perhaps not liking the less than secure grip Stannis was using. Armand further scrunched up his face and Stannis looked at me in alarm, but he was game

about adjusting his hold and swaying (very woodenly) back and forth in a bid to prevent Armand from full on screaming. Magnanimously, Armand rewarded the effort with a smile. Stannis stopped moving, amazed at this occurrence and I couldn't help my charmed cooing. That's mommy hormones for you. Everything Armand did was the most adorable, the most charming.

"There," Stannis finally said, once Armand's mouth returned to default position (which made him look faintly disapproving of the world) "That's proof enough that he is your son. His grin is just like yours."

"Oh, not only," I joked. "His ears are already standing away from his wee head."

"Ah. Well. Perhaps a wee bit," Stannis said.

I was fortunate in that I had plenty of company during my bed rest. Renly sidled up to me and whispered about how the birthing bed was truly a woman's battlefield in an awed voice. Omer interjected that I wasn't even in the birthing bed at all and Merrell concurred with his ubiquitous monosyllabic 'Yeah'. These adorable little scamps. I reminded them that whatever a pregnant woman wants, it is best to do whatever she says, because that was the way of the world. It mostly applied to food cravings, but the principle applied to whatever her body wanted doing while fighting through the labor pains. They all nodded simultaneously, receiving this information as the insider tidbit that it was, foreign to them in all ways.

Delena wanted to hold Armand very often and when she couldn't because I was holding him, she was sketching his likeness. She was coming along as quite the artist and I was glad to encourage her efforts. It did not take much for Alekyne and I to convince Uncle Alester to engage a Myrish artist to tutor her on the methods of Myrish painting. As I was more than a little fond of fine art from my home dimension we had good conversations about realism and technique and the concept of perspective. It would be quite something if our Delena could be the mother of Westeros' own artistic Renaissance. I entertained thoughts of her at least being as influential as Rembrandt when it came to portraiture alone. She practiced by using the family as subjects and her sneaking skills were used for her observations and she had larger notebooks made to serve as her sketchbooks. Our family life was being captured a moment at a time and it was lovely. My own drawing efforts are more diagrammatic than artistic; I can do axonometric projections for workshop drawings very well with pens but the softer curves required to effectively capture the likeness of people was a bit beyond me.

Alekyne and my brothers (Erren took the first ship off Dragonstone as soon as he got a raven) spent their time making faces at Armand and insisting that he was attempting to copy them. I'm sure myself that Armand just had a silly sort of yawn (one side of his mouth would move more than the other, giving him the impression of a morphing smirk) and that infants in general stuck their tongues out randomly but they were very insistent that he was more fun than that. Stannis would stand wincing in the background; he didn't like the idea of any child of his doing something so undignified as making faces.

I didn't know why I didn't expect Robert to show up. I suppose it was because he behaved so far as from the show and didn't pay attention to Joffrey. However, for Armand, he made the trip to the Foxhole before I was well enough to go through the official court presentation. He was even more jolly and excited than usual, so much so that Stannis was repelled to the

periphery of our room and yet drawn to hover by Robert in a push pull like an opposing magnet, anxious about the fact that Robert was holding Armand, his hands twitching until he had to cross them behind his back.

“Look at this frowny little one,” Robert boomed, grinning. “Look at him! He’s all yours, Stannis!”

“Gah,” Armand said.

Robert laughed and said that Armand resembled little Mya Stone. He got a little melancholy after saying so. Huh. Guess we’re having a conversation about her and the others, once I’m well enough. Stannis’ nostrils flared, insulted over the idea that any child of his resembled a bastard. But he had learned by now to really look at Robert and he saw that Robert didn’t mean insult by it. So he merely strongly suggested that Robert hand Armand back to me. Immediately.

Robert poked fun at Stannis’ anxiousness, of course. He certainly did not, in a warrior’s way, worry one bit about Cersei’s labor with Joffrey, no more than he worried about any random knight who rode beside him during a charge. In the midst of blood and battle, you looked to yourself in the chaos and hopefully your comrade in arms survived afterwards the same as you. Yet he was fascinated by Stannis and Renly’s recounting of my labor and he asked me directly about it too, finding my dealings with pain and blood relatable.

So relatable in fact, he surprised all of us by going out of his way and having a private talk with Midwife Alys. It turned out that my carefully tabulated notes during my pregnancy, laid out because show and tell was the best method of getting him to any level of proper understanding, was inspiring. It was a battle plan and he knew battle. It was therefore clear to him that one could do good by providing women in general with greater exposure to the wisdom and hard won knowledge of midwives like Alys and my notes.

Green boys squired with experienced knights and eventually were blooded with a proper battle. You can train and spar all you liked, but nothing was like the first thrill of triumph from killing your first man in combat. To think that women went through such a thing with only the hearsay of their female relatives if they were lucky, unknowing a lot of the time of what was even happening within themselves, untrained, unequipped for what was coming-! It struck him as very wrong, a thing that needed fixing. Warriors were made, he thought. He knew well enough that not everybody had that fighting madness that graced the Baratheons, that narrowing of senses and surging thrill that urged his House on to the kill. Most people have fear that holds them back and it is training that makes a body overcome that hesitation. There ought to be more than hearsay and prayers to the Mother for women when it came to the bloody business of laboring.

A kernel of an idea came to Robert and he chewed over it, pacing while dictating out loud to his secretaries. Eventually he went to Jon about it. A vague idea that the wives of the Marines and Gold Cloaks, not to mention the various knights and men-at-arms that lived within the Crownlands deserved to have medical attention at par to that of their husbands should they be

injured while serving the Crown became the basis of a plan. Robert Baratheon had a plan. Outstanding.

He thought the Royal Naval Academy served well enough for a model; experienced midwives like Alys would form the basis for a formalized passing on of their skills. The apprentices would be made to learn how to read and to learn the latest in hygiene and germ theory. New textbooks covering internal anatomy and health would be written and printed for distribution. General healing could be taught first at King's Landing's first teaching hospital and the best apprentices could be taken on to enter midwifery. Otherwise, competent healers would emerge from this system and they could subsequently be attached to the Gold Cloaks or Marines for future deployment.

Jon Arryn and Pycelle cautioned Robert about how the Citadel and the Hightowers would respond to this outright suborning of medical knowledge.

"So they want to be the only ones to know things?" Robert scowled. "Bah! They don't OWN knowing how to splint broken bones and stitch wounds and preventing festering. I decree, as King, that King's Landing should and WILL have a healer's academy established, with the goal of training midwives to serve the Crownlands in general and King's Landing specifically, and a place where the sick, injured, or pregnant may go to seek aid and comfort. So be it!"

Pycelle sputtered but stopped when Robert turned his scowl on him.

"Be glad that what your order wishes to keep to themselves so tightly is something that could be found by anybody with determination; knowledge. I don't need to remind anybody how I might have treated the Iron Islands if I wished to simply strip mine everything and put them all under the sword, do I?"

"It is still advisable to be cautious about offending House Hightower," Jon tried again.

"This is royal prerogative," Robert waved his fist for a moment. "Do they wish to interfere with me, in MY seat of power? King's Landing is the king's business! Point to me anywhere in Oldtown's city charter that it should be the one and only place of learning and education in Westeros! You can't. Nobody can. They may grumble if they wish. But they will not hinder me, or they'll know my wrath. They don't want to know my wrath. After all, they aren't stupid, are they? The way Balon Greyjoy was?"

Jon pursed his lips; it was vexing that Robert should threaten even in light jest to use war to get his way in things. He looked at the others at the Council table. Stannis looked approving, so there will be no call for caution there. Jon could understand that Stannis would want more healers for the Royal Navy. He would gladly take anything he could get when it came to improvements to the Navy. That Robert should spite yet another Reach House was no hindrance either. The Master of Coin might be cautious, unless Robert consulted with the Florents already and they gave him a report saying that to do such a thing would increase collectable taxes. Jon supposed it might be so; even the most novice of healing apprentices could make money making tinctures and poultices, buying or growing herbs for the purpose, and they would need to spend monies for room and board and sundry other things at the markets. Lord Varys agreed quickly enough to make report of any unrest from the Reach

regarding Robert's actions, not that it would be any surprise. The Master of Engineering would not be involved at all and certainly he would agree with Robert in order to make any future allocations of funding and manpower for projects more in his favor. The Master of Law would be in favor because the more people had gainful employment, the less crime and unrest within King's Landing.

Jon sighed to himself. Having some care for the consequences of precipitous action wasn't a flaw!

On the other hand, Robert had it right by the essentials. King's Landing was his demesne and he may do as any other lord might on his own lands and knowledge was certainly not at all like water, mining, logging, or hunting rights, where it was a limited resource that could be used up if allowed to be partaken without limit. He also did not particularly have issue with improving the availability of healers and midwives for the people of King's Landing.

He only wished that Robert would not be so ready to step on toes, unheeding of the need for care concerning the most influential of Houses, of making them more supportive of his rule by not causing offense. It was a difficult balancing act. He would not have Robert become so aggressive and domineering that he was seen with fear and certain loathing as his goodfather Lord Tywin Lannister. Jon could not predict the degree of unrest that such an action as Robert's might make. Robert saw things simply.

He supposed in this, they must once again trust the Florents. Perhaps this was yet one more expression of Reach political maneuvering, made large by the attention of a King. Had House Hightower offended House Florent of late? Lady Selyse and Lady Rhea made no secret that they were dismissed unfairly by the Maesters for being women and daring to invent and make discoveries. Was that reason enough to risk unrest in the kingdoms? Jon hoped they were not so petty as that.

Stannis finished reading the rest of *Fantastic Mr. Fox* in one evening. He did not have a curiosity about these fictional childhood tales of the Florents until Renly read him a few during Armand's birth. He assumed that one day, these books would be read to Armand, that the Florent way would be given to him tale by tale. Stannis wanted to read them all because he loved his wife. He also knew to trust but verify.

"Must you condone thievery?" Stannis waved the book at Selyse. "This is not appropriate."

"You are expecting that a family of foxes wouldn't steal chickens from a chicken farm? That's truly unrealistic," Selyse wrinkled her nose adorably.

"Foxes in deep woods do not steal farmers' livestock."

"Then there wouldn't be a story. Nobody wants to read about a family of foxes who do very normal fox things like hunting rabbits or squirrels."

"It's still siding with thieves."

“Yes, Stanny Blue Eyes, it is.”

“The other stories Renly read did not side with thieves. Crimes like kinslaying are punished in the end. And yet this,” Stannis waved the book one more time in emphasis. “Is the most favorite story of your family. It is baffling.”

“Is it, really?” Selyse tilted her head. “It’s about taking care of your family. It’s about helping your neighbors in need. It’s about outwitting a bunch of assholes out to murder you and your kin. Without killing them, by the way.”

“I am not Mr. Badger,” Stannis protested. “You will not sway me with the exact same argument that Mr. Fox made.”

“The fact of the matter is that most of the time, cleverness is of greatest use when one is circumventing the law.”

Stannis grunted at that.

“If one wishes to be lawfully clever, you begin by learning how the clever criminals go about it, so that you can catch or prevent them from doing what they want to do. You can’t just brute strength your way through problems with a hammer like your brother.”

Stannis suspected that he ought to stop thinking that anything the opposite of what Robert would do was the right thing to do. Because there was his way, the just way, and then there was Selyse’s way. Which was probably within the law, but definitely troublesomely crafty. Which made him terribly uneasy.

“That’s part of why I love you,” Selyse clambered into bed next to him, running the tips of her fingers lightly over his scalp. “You’re a man of principles. You’d stop me before any of us go too far.”

Stannis closed his eyes to enjoy the petting.

“I expect that you will most definitely disapprove of the pirate tales.”

Stannis’ eyes popped open.

“Pirate tales? Selyse, you did not-”

“Alekyne loves the pirate tales the most. Imry and Erren love the assassin tales the most.”

“Assassin tales-!”

“Don’t judge before reading,” Selyse reached over to the bedside table and picked up another book and passed it to him.

“Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl.”

“Oh,” Selyse started to giggle.

“What? What?”

“You pronounced it CAribbean!” she ducked her head, giggling.

Stannis waited for her to finish her hilarity. He pursed his lips but did not scowl; he had learned by now that she would never really laugh at him.

“Sorry. Made up word, you’ve obviously never heard of it, so I can’t expect anybody to know what I mean. And it’s ca-RIB-ean.”

“So you say.”

“I do say. I made it up, so I know how it is really pronounced.”

Stannis began reading. Selyse drowsed.

“Oh.”

“What is it?”

“Did you model the character of Jack Sparrow after your male relatives or did they model themselves after him?”

“That’s Captain Jack Sparrow, Stannis. Despite his flippant manner, he is a stickler for rank.”

“You did not answer my question.”

“They do find him entertaining and imitate some of his manners. Of course they can’t be like him, truly. He’s too strange. He’s also not real.”

Stannis nodded and continued reading. Eventually, Selyse fell into a deep slumber. Stannis did not feel that it would be untoward to stay up late to finish the book; tomorrow was a seventh day.

When he finished, he put the book down and considered what he had just read. It is inconceivable that a girl of mere fourteen could have composed such a story. He had barely anything to speak of with Delena, and she is a reasonable, sensible highborn girl with education. He did not think that this is because he is lacking in imagination, either. What made all these stories that Selyse has written down so compelling is that amongst all the fantastical elements, there are pieces of truth.

He would never be able to read that scene of Simba’s shock and despair at witnessing the death of Mufasa. It struck too true to his own emotions, of seeing his parents’ ship coming apart in Shipbreaker Bay. It could not be possible that another person, who has lost their own parents in that manner, could be made to describe it to some fourteen year old girl, for her to repeat for a mere childrens’ tale. Renly was able to read it out loud without hesitation because he did not remember. He did not know.

It frightens him. There is something uncanny at work with his wife. He knows that some of this must be because he himself cannot understand other people the way Selyse and her kin

do. He sees now that there is truth in one of her musings about him; that by choosing to only know what is right, he cannot comprehend those that do wrong. Before the Florents, he had to depend on Ser Davos to advise him, because after all, he made a living of breaking the law. He has been taught by Cressen and the Storm's End septon that to know evil is to be evil. And yet, at a young age, Selyse has somehow known all sorts of ugliness of human nature and written of it to serve as a warning to her kin so that they may be wary of the traps that come from human failing.

He does not fully believe the explanations that she was inspired by histories such as Maegor the Cruel or Aegon the Unworthy. They are, as she has scorned, obvious brutes. No, she has written of far more dangerous evils, of those who feign love for their own ends like Mother Gothel and Prince Hans while being in all ways inoffensive until the moment that their plans are thwarted and then they react with temper and violence as a last resort. From where could she have learned of such subtlety?

None of the Florents, not even Lord and Lady Florent, see anything amiss with Selyse. To them, she has always been brilliant, a gift of the gods. Selyse does not believe in gods. Or at least, she does not keep the Seven. Perhaps there is a reason for that?

He does not know what to think. He strokes the outer edge of one of her large Florent ears. She is a Florent. She has always been a Florent. She is not a babe found in the woods with unknown, strange, otherworldly parentage. That would simply be too outlandish. He also does not fear that she is feigning her love for him either. He does not enjoy any form of alcohol, but occasionally Selyse indulges in her Reacher side and has enough Arbor gold while reading in the evenings to make her tipsy. She comes to him, giggling and pink, affectionate and breathy. She sings to him sometimes and he gets shocked by the raunchiness of her lyrics. He is further shocked (in a pleasant way) by her antics. She dances about most provocatively, gyrating her hips at him while stripping out of her clothing and fairly daring him to reach out and touch her. Sometimes, she reacts by dodging away from him when he grabs at her arse and it always results in a merry little chase; she wriggles in such a tempting way when he catches her and they wrestle the whole way into bed, with her laughing and purring into his neck. It says something about her discretion when sober that he has never heard any of those songs being worked on by her family.

She always says without reserve while in her cups that she loves him. Sometimes there is more; if she has more than the usual amount of Arbor gold she expresses her fears when she is half asleep. Here she would clutch at him, mumbling about not wanting him to run off and die. She begged him to listen to her, to trust her, to please understand. Stannis is most perturbed then; she speaks of siege and the Wall, of White Walkers and undead coming, interspersed with her strange, rhythmic profanity.

"They are coming, they are coming. Motherfuckers are going to kill everybody. Fucking Daenerys didn't strafe for shit. You had air supremacy and you let one dragon die from a motherfucking scorpion bolt! Fly higher, idiot!"

Is she speaking of Daenerys Targaryen, daughter of Queen Rhaelle? Or some other of the past Targaryens?

"Who is Daenerys?"

“No situational awareness motherfucker!”

“Who is Daenerys?”

“The worst dragon owner. Like, you just needed to train those suckers to sit and heel and come and strafe. With a clicker like Chris Pratt. Strafe those motherfuckers-”

“Who is Daenerys?”

“Ham-fisted no political skills having fool.”

He wondered why he’s trying to interrogate a sleep-talking drunk.

“Who is Stannis?”

“The Mannis,” she giggle-snorted.

“Who are you?” he tried again.

“I’m not crazy.”

Stannis blinked and pet her hair, at a loss.

“Who are you?”

“Trust me,” she said plaintively. “Trust me.”

How can I, he thought despairingly, when you are hiding something from me?

“Trust you about what?” he tried again.

“Motherfucking White Walkers on this motherfucking planet.”

She fell truly asleep then. The next day, she recalled nothing.

Stannis wonders who amongst the Florents know about these troubling aspects of Selyse. Or is it truly that troubling? She gives no sign that her fear of White Walkers even exists while waking. Perhaps this is just an example of her control over illogical behaviors and choices that come from useless emotion.

He doesn’t know what to do. But he thinks he will not take action, for now. He will finish reading the rest of the Florent tales and come to a decision then. He ought to probably take notes in his own notebook about anything particularly curious. Perhaps there is something to be found there.

He is not married to a madwoman. All of the Florents he has met are odd in some manner or another and their oddness is in service of their creative process. We Dare With Craft. Perhaps their House went into a slow decline over the past centuries, unable to be anything except a typical banner House to the Tyrells, but with one generation of brilliant thinkers, their House words are true again. There is also the reality that their ideas come to fruition; the fact that

more than one of them have come up with the ideas, means that it cannot possibly be all on Selyse.

She most probably is afraid to reveal her fears about White Walkers to him because it would be his right to have her locked away from society. It is not unknown for such measures to be taken by husbands. So she hides it well and it only comes when she is drunk and not in full control. He admires her emotional control. It must take a toll on her equilibrium to have such a fear. It might even explain her occasional forays into imbibing overmuch drink in private. It is a flaw, but given what he knows of her, he is entirely willing to give her the benefit of doubt. He resolved to be patient with her.

Sunspear: Gift Horse in the Mouth

The court of Sunspear could not miss the lone ship flying Lannister sails making docking maneuvers at their harbor. This unexpected thing made Prince Doran Martell suspicious. Doran was well aware of the idiotic bid of the Iron Islands for independence. He received the raven announcing the thwarted attack on Lannisport. He also received another raven message announcing the definitive defeat of the Iron Islands. It took about two moonturns between these messages. Even Oberyne was impressed by the speed and efficiency of the response from the Royal Fleet. This did not bode well; this defeat of the Iron Islands proved that King Robert Baratheon does not sit on the Iron Throne based solely off of luck and his ability to wield a hammer. He has at the minimum a Small Council that knows their business and good, loyal fighting foot at his command. The Royal Fleet is a thing for awe and fear.

“Perhaps that ship’s crew are in dire need of resupplying and we are the closest harbor,” Oberyne suggested, coming to stand next to him at the window. “Entirely plausible.”

“But improbable.”

They watched and waited to see how it would go, one way or another. Eventually, a messenger wearing Lannister livery was shown in.

“A message from the King,” the messenger bowed. “I was told to wait for a response.”

Another attempt at diplomacy from Lord Hand Arryn, Doran supposed. He took the paper and noticed that it is of finer texture and make than any other sheet of paper he has ever handled before. A sign of Lannister wealth, perhaps? The King’s seal is correct and looked untampered with. Doran opens it.

Doran Martell, Prince of Dorne and Lord of Sunspear, greetings.

I am not a man in the habit of admitting mistakes and it became worse after I was crowned King. So it is with this knowledge that I am sorely out of practice and with no great skill at words that I do admit a mistake. I have carelessly injured your House.

It has been pointed out to me that when Rhaegar Targaryen stole my future happiness, he also stole from you and yours. His choice doomed himself, but also doomed the rest of his family. The grief I bear for my lost Lyanna must be a shadow to the grief you must feel at losing a most beloved sister and her children.

Nothing will bring Lyanna back to me. The same holds true for the loss to House Martell. However, justice is to be strived for and here, I make this over late attempt at amends. Let justice be done.

We have gained finally enough leverage to move Lord Tywin Lannister and we have the truth of it.

Ser Armory Lorch stabbed Princess Rhaenys over a dozen times.

Ser Gregory Clegane dashed Prince Aegon against a wall and finally, raped and killed your sister Elia.

Both men are chained alive within the ship that has also carried this message.

Do with them what you will.

Robert Baratheon, King, etc. etc.

Doran lowered the letter. He silently handed it over to Oberyn and watched him, fingers steeped under his chin to observe. His brother's emotions are so easy to discern; skepticism and then rage that settled into bloodthirsty eagerness.

"Let me have them both, Doran. You must give them over to me!"

"The Mountain is dangerous," Doran cautioned.

"Not as dangerous as me, at this very moment!"

Doran sighed at this obvious fact. He caught the eye of the waiting messenger.

"Is a written response necessary?"

The messenger shook his head.

"Only that I should confirm whether or not the message has been received, read, and the shipboard cargo accepted."

"We most gladly accept," Oberyn purred before Doran can say anything. "Do let the King know."

"Relay the order for the crew to unload the cargo from the ship. Under guard," Doran ordered the messenger.

The messenger bowed and left the room. Doran made a nod to Areo Hotah and he left to oversee the guards for the task. Doran then made a fond and disapproving thinning of his lips at Oberyn, who grinned at him.

"Before you go off to dispense justice," Doran held up a hand. "Tell me what else you noticed from that letter."

Oberyn looked down to reread the letter.

"... We have finally gained enough leverage to move Lord Tywin Lannister."

"Interesting words," Doran nodded. "Who is this 'we'? Are they the same person or persons who 'pointed out' to King Robert of the foolish, disgraceful way Prince Rhaegar betrayed

Elia?"

"Lord Arryn?"

"Perhaps. But is he the like to maneuver against Lord Tywin Lannister?"

Neither of them knew. But it was highly unlikely. Lord Arryn was reliable. Honorable. His was a negotiation style that relied on a well of patience and good manners that was as admirable as it was annoying to endure. He came at one with such good intentions that it felt untoward to disappoint. Fortunately, the Dornish predilection for savoring vengeance prevented them from feeling in any way bad about dismissing his efforts at reaching out. This was a work of cunning and the old man did not have the stomach for such play.

"Things have changed indeed in King's Landing," Doran tapped his chin. "I wish to find out if we have an ally true or if this is a feint, a catspaw. A false gift."

"I care not," Oberyn shrugged. "Whoever it is has my gratitude for daring against Lord Lannister."

"Such a person is either foolish in the scale of the Reynes and Tarbecks. Or," Doran nods to himself. "Extremely cunning."

"After my work here is done," Oberyn moved away from the window, eager. "I will go to King's Landing, to court. Let me find out what I can. And we will know how the board and pieces have changed."

They find Lorch gagged and in shackles. The Mountain is alive but unconscious in addition to being shackled. Throughout the trip, a healer was forcing doses of sleeping draught down his throat to keep him under, enough to knock out a horse. They are immediately moved to the dungeons for Oberyn to begin his work. As he must wait for the Mountain to regain consciousness it is Lorch who bore the brunt of his brother's attention first.

In the meantime, Doran invited the Lannister ship crew to stay and refresh themselves with food and drink. He would have any recountings they have of the Greyjoy Rebellion. He found out about the strength and skill of the Royal Marines and Gold Cloaks. He learned of the much improved Royal Fleet, crewed by skilled navigators that can plot courses from Dragonstone to the Iron Islands in less than a moon! He learned of how the Battle of Fair Isle went, how the Royal Fleet smashed the ships to pieces. He learned of the feast at Lannisport and has a list of House sigils that the sailors can recall. None of them are a surprise.

He learned that around two years ago from the captain that Lord Lannister ordered very specifically that ships anchored at Lannisport should always have crew aboard in shifts to keep watch. Everybody begrudgingly obeyed, unhappy with having no true shoreleave. But his actions were proven wise because the Ironborn did actually attack Lannisport by sailing in and trying to set ships on fire.

Now that, that is a surprise. Doran is very curious indeed on how Lord Tywin knew ahead of time, so much ahead of time, to prepare for an attack. Has he taken on a new, much more effective Master of Whispers?

He went to his solar and began sorting out raven messages.

The last Royal message was that Lady Selyse Baratheon has safely delivered a child, called Armand Baratheon, heir to Master of Ships, Lord Stannis Baratheon.

Quotidian.

The message before that was more unusual. It announced that as a Lord Paramount House, the Martells are entitled to first news and pick of buying shares in the establishment of the Iron Islands Trading Company, where new, faster trading ships would be built and crewed by experienced Ironborn sailors and captains that would make trading voyages to Essos. The profits from such voyages would be split by share proportion.

Doran had ignored it as some sort of fanciful nonsense or yet another attempt to convince Dorne to engage with the rest of the Seven Kingdoms by Lord Arryn.

Now he saw instead that with this, along with two other messages, one announcing that the Iron Islands would have a permanent outpost of Royal Marines and that the Iron Islands' mining rights were given in majority to the oversight of House Lannister for the temerity to attack Lannisport, that there must be a greater plan in action.

It is not a plan of Lord Tywin's. For Doran and everybody knew that after Castamere, to offend the Old Lion was to turn your House into nothing but bones and dust. To this day the mines of the Reynes are flooded, their gold and other ores left untouched as a testament to Lord Tywin's decisive brutality.

It is not a plan of Lord Arryn's especially because of the inclusion of the formation of the Trading Company. The Arryns have split from themselves over the matter of trade. Lord Jon would rather collect taxes from the profitable enterprises of others than to come up with his own enterprises.

It is certainly not a plan of King Robert. The idea is laughable.

Doran thought as he peeled an orange at dinner. The inclusion of the Royal Marines means that it is somebody on the Small Council.

"Oberyn?"

His brother looked up from his meal.

"I think you should perhaps get to know the Master of Ships. Perhaps the middle son of that family received the share of brains that was supposed to go to his older brother by the gods."

After weeks at sea, Oberyn heard the call that King's Landing is in sight by a lookout and climbed up onto deck from his cabin. He smells no particular stench. Curious. Oberyn sniffed hard; perhaps he is coming down with a cold. But no, King's Landing smelled no more or less than Old Town or Planky Town. He disembarked with no great fanfare and made his way to find lodgings to his taste in close proximity to the Street of Silk. On the way, he discovered

the reason for the marked reduction in stench; multiple colorfully marked barrels have been placed at every street corner behind partitions and he can even see some inside taverns, where people may urinate and defecate. He's passed many carters with shovels, shoveling up dung from animals and changing out full barrels with empty ones.

He leisurely took his time and allowed himself to be seen out and about. He was not summoned to court. He didn't think that Lord Varys would be so derelict in his duty. He also didn't think, after that very pretty missive from King Robert, that they meant to snub him and therefore House Martell. Perhaps they believed that he has actual business of his own unconnected with his brother and do not wish to impose upon him, though it is the King's prerogative to impose upon anybody he wishes. It is already a much different court than King Aerys' if that is so. The paranoid man demanded that anybody of import must be present and accounted for to prevent any whiff of conspiracy.

There is no move but to go forward. He sent off a messenger formally announcing his presence in King's Landing. He received an invitation to dinner at court. He smiled to himself. Now he will see how things have changed. When Elia was alive, dinners were grim and silent events with King Aerys absent because of his suspicions against Prince Rhaegar.

That evening, King Robert stepped forward to greet him and Oberyn started salivating. The muscles on that man! Oberyn smiled and bowed and tried to tamp down his now very inconvenient libido. He fared much better when facing Queen Cersei; he does not forget that she is the fruit of the Old Lion's treacherous, murdering loins, no matter how beautiful she is. It helped that he remembered her well as a spoiled, high-handed little girl, who was cruel to her helpless baby brother when he visited Casterly Rock long, long ago with Elia. The Small Council is reintroduced. He nodded in recognition to Maester Pycelle and Lord Varys.

He is at last introduced to Lord Stannis and his wife, Lady Selyse. He noticed very quickly that unlike the King and Queen, they stand and move together like a paramour couple, a couple in love and great lovers of each other. This is not to say that the lady hangs off the man's arm or that they kiss in public. It was that when one took a step the other followed and when they shift stance, they do not bump into each other needlessly, in good harmony. They are aware, perhaps without their conscious knowledge, of each other's presence.

He also admired them as a couple. Lady Selyse had a most engaging smile and ease of expression despite her plainness to counterbalance Lord Stannis' naturally grim mien. They both have legs for days and though Stannis was not so broad as his brother the King, he is certainly pleasingly filling out that jacket of his. The lucky man also had a wife with very admirable buttocks, from what Oberyn can see because of her dress. The both of them had very admirable buttocks, in fact.

It is no hardship, Oberyn quickly decided, to attempt to get to know the Master of Ships better.

He can see that King Robert preferred to dine with his relatives close at hand; young Lord Renly has the seat to his left that evening and the King remained focused on his youngest brother in conversation. He cannot tell if the King and Queen have just recently had an argument or not; they do not say much to each other and the Queen has a bored expression. Lady Selyse sitting next to Lord Stannis was in conversation with Lady Arryn. Oberyn

judged that either they are honestly friends or that they are feigning friendship for the benefit of the court.

The two ladies are attired and with their hair arranged so differently from the Queen that it must be a statement. The Reacher and Vale women in court imitated them in some fashion. At the minimum, their hair is put up in the same manner. They looked charmingly tousled, as if they just came back from a round of riding hunting horses. Or a round of rolling around in bed making love. Of the dresses, some merely had slim sleeves suitable for showing off masses of stacked bracelets, like Lady Arryn. This evening, she wore a short, winged capelet in the Vale style. Others had those pocketed jackets with contrasting cord trim, like Lady Baratheon. The younger ladies were daring enough to have those gratifyingly figure-hugging slim skirts. When paired with the Reacher penchant for lower necklines, it's a visual feast.

The Crownlanders have changed as a whole to match the look of the Baratheons. Nobody Westermen has yet changed their attire, choosing to follow the Queen. Her hair was in that high Westerman crescent roll with braids. Her sleeves were billowing with contrasting, embroidered lining and her skirts were almost tent-like, an extravaganza of satin silk yardage. She wore a heavy necklace of golden lionheads with ruby eyes and with faceted rubies clutched in their jaws. Her wide belt was also golden and with engravings of lions leaping and running. She was an imposing, regal, properly queenly vision, in the best of Westermen traditional style.

It must aggravate her beyond reason, Oberyn laughs to himself, that the King has attired himself to match his brothers and the Hand in the new style. He quite liked the new jacket styles these Andal men are wearing. He himself would feel trussed up like a goose in the high band collars and fully buttoned up jackets, but he could see perfectly well how there is a sleek modernity in the fit that makes the doublets still worn by others at court look out of mode.

There was more to this than a visual representation of which families were in influence in court. Doran has told him that troublingly, Dornish cotton spinners and weavers were losing their livelihoods as bales of raw cotton are being bought up in great numbers by merchants coming from the Reach, seeds and all. Other merchants were selling Reacher made fabrics in Dorne and these new Reacher cotton fabrics are... very good. They were dyed in the warm colors favored by the Dornish; the bolts are somehow wider and longer, with more even texture and tighter weave, and come in patterns like stripes, checks, or gingham which ought to cost more from the time spent to weave, but are yet cheaper than solid colored fabric produced in Dorne. Doran cannot make out how it is possible. For now, the cotton spinners and weavers were adapting by working on linen, but Doran is afraid that it is only a matter of time before the Reach tries to take over also. Unrest from smallfolk without livelihoods is a threat to all of Dorne.

Oberyn saw that the stripes and patterns he had started to notice in the markets in Dorne are present here at court, done in different local House colors to suit. The Reach has somehow convinced the court, and therefore the rest of the nobility of the Seven Kingdoms, that patterned cotton and wool are the fabrics of fashion, chipping away at the dominance of silks from Essos. The secret must be in the woven patterns; Oberyn had a vague idea that most bolts of cloth are solid in color and the current court was revelling in having clothes that were

already in House colors by pattern, compared to having to depend on whatever limited colors made available by the traders from Essos with no guarantee on desired House colors. Granted, there was still silk of course, but in smaller amounts; thin scarves nonchalantly tied at the neck for both the men and women. There is an outdoorsy readiness to these clothes; the King is known to love hunting and wool and cotton wears better for such activity. It is conceivable that he may go from court to a hunt with just one jacket and pair of trousers, needing only to put on riding boots and to unbutton his collar. It was ingenious, really. The Reach are cornering the market in luxury and they are dressing the masses of smallfolk in King's Landing itself for coppers per yard in plain, undyed cottons and wools.

Oberyn thought on all those coppers in the hundreds of thousands being funneled into the coffers of the Tyrells and it made his mouth pucker in distaste. Something ought to be done. He supposed after this that he might make a trip to Old Town, find some of his Reacher Citadel compatriots and take advantage of their hospitality while he snooped to find out the secrets of Reacher fabric production. The boring, economic, sort of espionage instead of the sexy, assassinating sort with swooning wenches. Ugh.

The dinner wound down and a group of musicians at the end of the dining hall began to play. Oberyn saw that this must be a very common entertainment; the center of the dining hall was left clear from the start, with the long dining tables arranged at the periphery. The King stood and offers his hand to the Queen. It was all very correct, this first dance, with other couples joining in. Oberyn stifled a yawn. He girded his loins, picked up his wine glass and began to small talk. He smiled and bowed and greeted his way up to the high table.

He had fun winking at Lady Arryn and making her blush. Lord Arryn ignored his mischief, of course, sedately speaking very reasonably about improving Dornish relations with the Crown. Now this was actually useful, so Oberyn doesn't have a problem with continuing the conversation. He was just about to attempt dropping the doings of the Royal Fleet into the conversation, but the music ended with applause and the strains of a new tune he has not heard before start up.

"Do excuse us, Prince Oberyn," Lord Arryn said. "I must have this dance with my wife."

Oberyn nodded easily and noted that the King and Queen had returned to their seats. Reacher and Vale folk stand up. A few Crownlanders stand up. Very interestingly two Westernmen couples stand up. Hmm.

He didn't know this dance but he's sure he's going to have to interrogate the court musicians and possibly get a dance instructor about it very soon. It's embracing while upright. Scandalous. He had not thought that Andals had it in them to create anything the like. He enjoyed the sight very much. He especially enjoyed watching the best couple on the floor; Lord and Lady Baratheon. He saw very easily that they moved more vigorously, with more pivots, spins, and turns, and they went around the floor avoiding others with enviable ease. Lady Barathon's arched back as she bent backwards, with Lord Baratheon faintly smiling down at her during turns made them both terribly attractive. Oberyn felt like he was being seduced watching them seduce each other on the dance floor.

The dances alternated between this new dance, which Oberyn learned is called the Foxtrot, and the traditional court dances. The Florents were behind this dance, then? Interesting. It

must be so, as the Baratheons continued to put on a show on the floor. Oberyn observed that Lord Baratheon readily relinquished his wife's hand to others for the traditional dances but did not often participate himself. The only person either of them danced the Foxtrot with is each other. The King and Queen did dance some more, but Oberyn came to the conclusion that the Queen didn't know the Foxtrot, when the King, with a grateful nod from a visibly tired Lord Arryn later in the evening, led Lady Arryn out on the floor.

He watched the correct posture and distance between the two for the dance hold, the carefree way Lady Arryn danced, and the jolly, yet disinterested expression on the King's face and concluded that those two are not having an affair. He's asked around already and nobody had qualms about scandalous gossip with the Dornish man.

As far as anybody can figure from his information gathering, the King was being faithful to the Queen. Nobody had any idea how long that will last and Oberyn was even made aware of a betting ring on the duration of this round of constancy, considering King Robert's previously obvious habit of whoremongering prior to his brother's marriage. Nobody had bets on Lord and Lady Baratheon. It is widely known that he fucks her in his Master of Ships office during lunch. Every single day. Every single day? Oberyn raised his eyebrows. Every single day, was the snickering response. Or often enough to make no difference. Didn't she recently give birth? He got shrugs from this; she still visited every lunch at the same time and more than one person has confirmed that Lord Baratheon still yells out his spending in his office. Oberyn's impressed; Andal ladies are usually so finicky about using their mouths.

This also hinted that the two of them are tediously exclusive lovers, but Oberyn wanted to find out for himself for sure.

He approached Lord Arryn once more and it seems that this Lord Hand is much more sociable than Lord Tywin Lannister, as he was in the habit of holding smaller, more intimate dinners in his apartments with Lord and Lady Baratheon in attendance. He invited Oberyn to attend. It's almost suspiciously too easy, but Oberyn doesn't care. He'll have his chance to investigate potential opportunities with the Dragonstone Baratheons and finagle information about the doings of Small Council.

He can hardly wait.

King's Landing: A Viper Goes a Slithering

The evening after that first dinner at court, Oberyn paid a visit to a brothel and after laying with a whore that he recognized from the last time he was in King's Landing, summoned for a bottle of wine and settled in for some conversation. How has King's Landing changed for her, Cecily, since the crowning of the new king?

It was the little things. The Gold Cloaks were swept clean of old corruptions; her madame no longer paid protection monies nor tolerated Gold Cloak men making free of her and her fellow whores at this particular brothel at high discount to keep them cordial. In fact, patrolling Gold Cloaks down the Street of Silk were now more likely to be making themselves useful by restraining the men who were like to get violent while drunk. New laws pertaining to the King's Peace were put into effect and even whores afforded simple protection. Apparently the exceptionally violent and rowdy who accosted others would be rounded up and put into dedicated holding cells of the closest Gold Cloak stations for the night to become sober, whereupon they were subjected in the morning to counseling by a local septon or septa for the purpose while given a bowl of stew about controlling their impulse for public drunkenness. Oberyn laughed at this strange new Andal practice.

Cecily didn't mind.

Maidenheads were no longer allowed to be put up on auction on the Street of Silk. Whores had to be at least six and ten years of age and chose to be prostitutes by their free will.

Oberyn scoffed at that. Cecily nodded eagerly; it seemed that some pimps and madames did not believe such strictures at first and found themselves stripped of cash and the men at least sent to the Wall and the whores either moving on to different brothels or even setting up anew as compliant heads of brothels, often in the very same building. If any whores under the age or being held against their will were found, they were taken away. Cecily found some of them again and it heartened her to know they were in orphanages if younger or being assisted by some one or other motherhouse or septray. The fact of the matter is that so many were shamed by what happened to them that though they might return to their previous life, most did not. Could not. So they were housed for a time, seeking solace with the Seven and then obtaining some training that made them suitable for some trade or another.

Cecily reckoned that was all right. She herself was a daughter of a whore and knew of no other way to make a living. It would be one thing if she was a lone streetwalker, out in the cold of the night between picking up men, having to be wary of angrier, more aggressive whores who staked out one or other corner of the street for themselves, venturing out of the protection of the Street and into the other parts of King's Landing, always at risk for getting mugged for her coin in the course of a night. If that was so, she'd go and seek shelter at a motherhouse and learn how to- she didn't know, sew or cook or take in washing. It sounded like hard work and Cecily didn't think she would like to do such things. Cecily did not have to worry; she was a brothel whore and even knew how to dance and sing so she afforded higher prices for her presence.

Were the Gold Cloaks truly reformed? She thought so. She even recognized some of the Gold Cloaks who had regular routes on the Street of Silk as sons of whores, who were familiar faces and had sympathy.

She chattered on, about the prettiness of the wares of the cloth merchants nowadays, about the fresher and greater variety of foodstuffs at the markets, about how it was so much better in the streets with veritable army of dung carters at work everyday, how now that she had more coin because her madame didn't demand a greater cut to pay off Gold Cloaks that she could buy herself jewelry of her liking for the first time and engage better seamstresses for new dresses. She giggled over spending time looking at new hats and looking at all the choices she now had for ribbons or fabric flowers or even feathers for said hats. That was the new thing; using the long and shiny plumes from rooster tails for adornment. Though she wouldn't say no to a gift of a hat with pheasant feathers or, or, why, a peacock's feathers from Essos!

She was happy, Oberyn thought. She is happy, this simple whore in King's Landing.

He thanked her, drank the last of the wine and made his way back to his lodgings.

During the dinner, he found out that King Robert was in the habit of either sparring with White Cloaks in the Red Keep proper or training with Gold Cloaks and Royal Marines at the Dragonpit in the morning. At noon he had lunch and after that he would sit to hear petitions for a few hours. Afterwards, he would withdraw to train some more or in his personal office and then he would have dinner. Sometimes with the court present, sometimes privately with the royal family.

Oberyn resolved to rise early enough to see this new development at the Dragonpit.

He had noticed the change to the shape of it while sailing into dock; the broken ribs of the old dome had been removed entirely. It was now more like a tall piecrust. Oberyn doubted that anyone would be referring to it as the Piecrust, though it surely had not housed dragons in living memory.

He rode up the hill in the morning. He was allowed in of course and settled in the shade to observe.

The sheer size of the Dragonpit served very well as a training ground. The men in training wore short trousers and short-sleeved tunics and the only way to tell the difference between the Gold Cloaks and the Royal Marines in training was that the Gold Cloaks wore yellow sashes at their waists and the Royal Marines wore blue.

About fifty men were running a circuit while wearing armor. Still others were doing push ups, sit ups, and other such basic drills. The King was among them. He was running at the head of the group, yelling out verses and the rest of the men repeated the verse, keeping time on the run.

"I got a booger hanging outta my nose-!"

"-I got a booger hanging outta my nose!"

Oberyn raised his eyebrows.

“I flick it off and see where it goes-!”

“-I flick it off and see where it goes!”

“Now I got a booger sticking on my hand-!”

“-Now I got a booger sticking on my hand!”

“I shake it off and see where it lands-!”

Oberyn could not define the feeling he felt, listening as the King of the Seven Kingdoms went on, the ersatz booger the subject of even more verses. It was ridiculous. And yet, he did notice that the runners did not lag and were in good cheer as they rounded the circuit.

He did not know how long they were going to continue their run, so he watched the others going through their exercises and drills. He was beginning to notice some measure of difference. The Gold Cloaks were occupying a space where there was a wrestling ring and going through grapples and holds.

Still others were in a row in front of training dummies, striking using cudgels the like he had never seen before. Instead of a simple wooden shaft, there was a short perpendicular handle at the lowermost quarter. They gripped this handle and made short efficient movements as they punched forward, with the either the short protruding end or spinning out the longer end to strike. Every so often, they would make blocking motions, raising their forearms up, with the long shaft of the cudgel against their forearms.

Intrigued, he had one of the Gold Cloak captains, a Ser Donnel, explain to him the purpose of this new weapon. The Gold Cloaks on patrol within the city were tasked with catching and restraining persons with nonlethal methods of subduing. They trained to outrun most fleeing thieves, for example, and to wrestle them to the ground. The Side-Handle Cudgel was a versatile weapon, adding hard force to punches and quickly serving as a shield as well, allowing for more free use within confined spaces like the winding alleys of Fleabottom and no risk of fatally injuring bystanders in a brawl within pubs, for example.

Now why would they bother with apprehending running culprits? A blade to the back served to keep the peace, no? Or at least, the threat of it.

If they were able to steal and mug, they are able to find gainful employment, the captain replied. It was perfectly respectable to be a dung carter, a porter at the docks, or working on any number of the construction projects going on courtesy of the Crown. Why, there would always be work at the Royal Shipyard on Wendwater land. Though, the captain scoffed, some grown men had too much pride to go about humbly and learning new ways. Or too feeble-minded, he supposed. So off to the Wall they go, he concluded practically.

Did he believe all these sorts of changes were good and better? The Ser Donnel looked out at the men and rubbed his moustache. Why, yes. He thought so. The King made everyone enthusiastic and though there was trouble in the beginning with all the new rules and

requirements for Gold Cloaks to know the law in greater detail, it stood to reason that they couldn't very well uphold the laws if they didn't know them enough. It also helped that there were now ways for men getting on in years, such as himself, to keep on working as a Gold Cloak instead of being unceremoniously put out to pasture like some old horse. What was that? Oh, well, he was learning how to read and write, so that he could start moving on to detective work. He applied for more training at the Gold Cloak Academy for the purpose. He had years worth of experience patrolling King's Landing and knew it well; he should like to continue serving in a capacity that didn't rely on the vigors of youth; chasing, catching, fighting, that sort of thing. Detectives interrogated, searched for signs and clues in order to solve crimes, that sort of thing. He reckoned that it would be well to know when it was timely to step away from active patrolling, not that he couldn't show the recruits a thing or two in a spar!

And speaking of sparring, looks like the King is ready for today's session in the training ring. When the King appeared at the Dragonpit, men rushed to put their names in a lottery; he would spar with up to ten challengers drawn. Others might have a chance at trying their skills against a White Cloak.

Oberyn watched the first few bouts with narrowed eyes. King Robert, for the purposes of friendly training spars, wielded a regular-sized training warhammer, instead of the one he preferred in battle, purportedly a monster of a weapon that required others to use two hands whereas he was strong enough to swing it one-handed. It would be, he thought finally, really something to see King Robert seriously fighting; killing. Because he was far swifter than one would expect for a man of his size and he was in such control of the training warhammer that it sometimes seemed to whirl faster than sight. The men entered against him with tourney swords and shields.

He was a big target, no mistake, but his footwork was very good; he rose up on the balls of his feet, moving from side to side, catching their strikes with his shield. He allowed for at most five strikes against him to be sporting before lashing out with his hammer, great resounding strikes against their shields. He would essentially beat upon the shield, a hammer against a nail and they would fall, overwhelmed by his strength. Once he forced them upon the ground, they would yield and he would help them up and laugh, slap them about the shoulders, praising their efforts.

This smallest measure of his prowess was still enough for Oberyn to judge him a magnificent in battle. It was really unfair.

He was too kind, Oberyn thought, merely beating on the shields. Granted, if he did aim for body parts the way he pounded at the shields, they would quickly run out of Gold Cloaks and Marines; those were true dents on the metal. A blow to the head, or the chest, as what happened to Rhaegar? Mortal wounding.

This was all hardly useful to him, if he wanted to maintain fighting form, Oberyn finally thought. So this must be for keeping the spirits of the men up and establishing camaraderie, loyalty. Judging from the happy grins from the men that he beat into the dirt time and time again, it must be working.

Andal men are so simple.

If they wanted a show, why, he could do it! He could go down there and challenge the King to a spar and then they would see something worth talking about. He was almost set to order Ser Donnel to go inform the King that he would do so. But then he wondered whether there were any tourney spears available or not. And that moment was enough for him to remember that Doran had lectured him to not cause scandal like a peevish septa before leaving. Tiresomely so, really. Did this count as scandal?

“Would the King spar with me, do you think?” he addressed Ser Donnel.

“Oh-! Well-”

The discomfited hemming and hawing of the poor knight was more than enough.

“Never mind,” Oberynd waved a hand. “I was merely so inspired by what I was watching. It is not everyday that royalty allows such familiarity.”

“Oh, that’s only here,” Ser Donnel demurred. “King Robert doesn’t expect courtly manners while training. Stands to reason, don’t it? Sweat and bruises, that sort of thing. I’ve been to court with the Commander when the Hand had need of us and it is all that is proper and mannerly there. Isn’t it so, my lord?”

“You were not at court before, no? I think I might have remembered you if it were so.”

The knight shook his head.

“Only the Commander had call to go to court and not regularly at that. Nowadays, they want to know about King’s Landing in a more regular way. Make sure that the people are happy.”

“So good of them,” Oberynd drawled.

“Only doing what they ought,” Ser Donnel shook his head. “The Lannisters... T’was terrible, the Sack.”

“The Queen is a Lannister.”

“That’s so, my lord,” Ser Donnel agreed. “But that don’t mean that the King must do as the Old Lion. Old Lion, he’s fearsome. No doubt, no doubt. But the King. He’s not like that. He’s not got to be. Just got to be better than the Mad King and I figure he’s already up by not burning people. But plain not doing something’s just not enough. Not after what the Lannisters did to King’s Landing. People remember. He’s doing well by doing well by the people. It’s good.”

Well. So Lord Arryn was that capable. How fortunate for King Robert.

King Robert went through all who won the lottery that day.

Oberynd made his presence known then. He smirked at the gimlet eye Ser Barristan was giving him. However, Doran was entirely serious this time around and Oberynd supposed that he ought to heed his brother and not have cause to flee to Essos by getting himself into trouble on purpose. So he didn’t try to get the King to spar with him. Instead, he inquired as

to lunching with the King, who grinned and said something about beef brisket being ready that afternoon, finally.

Brisket? The chewiest, toughest part of cattle? Was this a terrible jape?

Oberyn swallowed his reservations about the lunch and smiled.

Lunch was a surprise. When they convened, it was in the Maidenvault proper, a much more private affair than court. This brisket seemed to be of great interest, for the entire Council showed up, both of the King's brothers, Lady Baratheon, and the Queen with her ladies in waiting.

Lord Stannis and Lady Selyse entered together and once again, they caught his eye. She walked with long strides, with no daintiness, swinging along with wonderful, live, big gestures. He, in contrast, was more contained, the top half of his body more immobile and his hands clasped correctly behind his back, with his head a little downturned and his jaw jutting, making him seem contentious as he bowed his head in greeting to his brother, the King. The King grinned upon seeing his brother, though. So there was that.

They first had salad with sliced beets, nuts, and goat cheese. After that there were dishes of honeyed carrots, scoops of sauerkraut, and steamed sweet peas. Oberyn wondered if he might go to his lodgings hungry if that was all.

His misgivings were interrupted when servants entered the hall with a great covered platter. They set it before the King. He carefully brought the napkin on his lap up, tucking it into the collar under his chin, smiling with anticipation. Others were doing so also and Oberyn followed suit. The dome covering the platter was lifted up and Oberyn's lips thinned.

It was a dark, charred looking log of meat. Absurdity.

The King set to with a carving knife and fork, putting a generous portion on a plate and gestured for the servants to place it in front of Oberyn, who smiled graciously back at him. He carefully cut a piece, absently noting that he did not have to saw through any cartilage, so that seemed well, and placed a piece in his mouth.

The noise he made, an ecstatic groaning of surprise and pleasure, was enough to have the whole hall staring at him.

Oh.

"... It's just so good," Oberyn exclaimed.

The King grinned and chuckled out a warm agreement and everybody else followed in agreement. It entirely explained their enthusiasm.

Brisket- how wonderful! He had never had something like this, meat that was- was- He was wordless, gorging himself on peppery, salty, smoky tender goodness!

Now this was feasting, Oberyn thought. Afterwards, he did not have the mind to move, he was so satiated. He asked around and found that this was yet another new thing, preparing

some of the most recalcitrant, undesirable cuts of meat into fantastic wonders by smoking them into submission. It was truly a pity that oak and hickory trees did not grow in southern Dorne; there were some similar hardy trees that clung to life in the mountains. Perhaps this calls for some experimentation once he went back home. At the least, he would gain the instructions for building a smoker for the meat and the proper recipe; that he promised himself very strongly.

The Baratheon brothers sat in a group once more, with Lord Renly in the middle again. The King and his youngest brother spoke quietly to each other, though the King would occasionally chortle or grip his brother's shoulder, pleased by whatever it was they were speaking of. Lord and Lady Baratheon spent much of the meal looking at each other. Their gazes were warm banked embers that looked fit to burst into hot flame if they should touch. Their rumored regular lunch habit came to the forefront of Oberyn's mind and he had to turn his gaze, lest he get caught staring too obviously. Such looks were nothing to note back in Dorne. But these Andals were so cold, so reserved, though there was no threat of being burned in this court, not like the last, it was simply the Andal way, that a pair that demonstrated such obvious regard to each other was arresting.

He watched as the King occasionally addressed the Queen. They were no love match, it was clear. He supposed part of it was that the King was famously in love with the Stark girl. If it was true, if his heart was lost, Oberyn didn't reckon that he would feel anything at all for his Queen. If he did act more affectionately with the Queen, Oberyn paradoxically would have thought less of him for it. Cersei seemed secure, her pride, so amusing and faintly ridiculous in a little child, now worn like a mantle on the shoulders of a grown woman. Well. That Lannister hauteur was bred into the Casterly Rock Lannisters to a great degree and she was the epitome of that type. There was none of that good humor nor sensible ways of her late mother Joanna to leaven that arrogance. He might have hated her less for presuming to take Elia's place as Queen if that were so. If she were just another who had to bow to the will of her father, as so many of these Andal daughters did. But no. No, she was as grasping as her father.

And though the lioness has caught her stag, this was no clean hunt. For lions do not do well alone and though her brother Ser Jaime was here in King's Landing, it was not to be forgotten that male and female lions do not hunt together. No doubt if Oberyn should stand and throw a dagger at the Queen, his head would be off his shoulders before the dagger found its mark. No, she was alone to try to bring the Old Lion's will to bear at court and she was failing, failing while falcon and trout, fox and stag, danced and cavorted in front of her and the lioness was left turning on her tail, snapping at air and gaining nothing for her energies spent.

There must be something in all this, Oberyn thought as he drank his wine. Robert Baratheon was no great thinker. He knew thinkers. His brother was a great brooding thinker. The King was almost, but not quite, an oaf like Lord Mace Tyrell. The Fat Flower was simply unendurable from his pompous posturing. He drew nothing but contempt from others not beholden to him every time one was forced into his company. No, what made it interesting was that Robert was one of those men of limited range but within that range, he was a master. A warlord. A hunter. A carouser. A very, very friendly man, who seduced through good humor and undeniable good looks. He was just so much fun. And Oberyn did like fun.

Inconvenient, that.

He didn't want to like the man. He laughed, he laughed at the murders of his kin- how dare that big- stupid-!

Oberyn put his wine cup down more firmly than needed and stuffed another bite of brisket into his mouth.

This was why Doran gets so exasperated, Oberyn mused. Surely Doran would never let such emotions get in the way of what he wants. What they want.

And so much of that dripping venom that ate away at his heart stopped that fine moment when he castrated The Mountain. How he laughed then!

What would happen, if he should challenge Robert Baratheon to a duel? If he should proclaim out loud for witnesses, accusing him for the premature dimming of Elia's beautiful light in this world? For her children? He would accept, Oberyn thought, after observing him in the Dragonpit. He would understand the need, the love that served the reason and Robert Baratheon would in no way begrudge him because did not he do the same for that Stark girl? He wouldn't be angry one bit. And what a waste it would be, to not even rouse that famed fury!

It was the worst thing, Oberyn thought, to find that King Robert Baratheon was too straightforward and lacking in cunning to be worth hating in that way. He never planned to take his place on the Iron Throne as a House bid to unseat the Targaryens the way the Blackfyres did as a matter of course. As far as Oberyn could discover from his gossip gathering, if Rhaegar hadn't made off with the Stark girl and Aerys hadn't demanded the arrest and extradition of both of Lord Arryn's wards, Robert Baratheon would have been perfectly happy to be Lord of Storm's End, Lord Paramount. It was, Oberyn sardonically laughed to himself, House Targaryen picking and picking at House Baratheon until that legendary fury roared up; they reaped the whirlwind, a hurricane! How the Laughing Storm would have laughed!

No, those Baratheons were not like to do as in Dorne. They would not have been taught grievances at their father's knee, to remember the broken promises, slights, visited upon their great-grandfather, and who knows what else. They were quick to temper and foolishly forgiving once the storm passed, but this time, this time the Targaryens aroused the temper of a Baratheon with the brute strength to end things. Personally.

It was not admirable, precisely. It was amusing. Surely, King Robert himself did not even consider this, was not the sort to consider the history of his House being leal to their Targaryen cousins and receiving nothing but trouble for it. For him, it was so simple. A man took his betrothed. He had to die. That Robert won a crown for it was an afterthought.

The wretched luck of it all. For Robert Baratheon to be so likeable. So strong and handsome. So guileless with simple, simple wants.

No, it would not do to focus on him. Oberyn must needs observe all who surrounded him.

He missed his chance from his full stomach to try speaking to any of the Baratheons in more detail, but did manage to make his planned appearance in the Great Hall.

Beside the entry there were pieces of paper pinned to a board covered with a layer of cork. He went over to investigate and found a list of petitioners named and their issue summarized, for that day. Another paper listed offices of Council Masters that ought to be consulted prior to attempting to bring their issue to the King. Another listed the issues that must be taken to the Small Claims Court of King's Landing. For the illiterate, there were scribes sitting behind a table next to the board, to explain what was on the board and interviewing the smallfolk who came to petition. They took notes and after discussion to their satisfaction, wrote down the petition, read it out loud to the petitioner and finally took down the name, occupation, and neighborhood of the petitioner, the date and with all due ceremony, signed the document, and had the petitioner press down an inked thumbprint. The document was rolled up and sealed with wax and given to the petitioner. They then almost invariably directed the petitioner to go to the Small Claims Court, which they assured had the full vested authority of the King through the administration of the Master of Laws.

He was amazed at the amount of paper being handed out so casually. To smallfolk! Granted, the document was rolled up to best protect the writing and the petitioners themselves were sometimes overawed at the act of touching the papers, handling them with exaggerated care, but it seemed quite the expense. He also noticed that the scribes were writing with an entirely new kind of writing instrument instead of quills. They seemed almost like styluses, except there were no inkpots at all. Now that, that was interesting. He'd have to investigate that.

As he had no petitions, he went in and found a space to stand and watch.

King Robert was in formal regalia. Wrought gold antlers formed his crown and the band was studded with faceted onyx stones. He wore a cloth of gold cloak, which Oberyn noticed Robert sat upon, providing a measure of protection against the iron edges of the throne. His black wool jacket had racks of gold embroidered antlers arranged on the breast and cuffs, many and richer than the gold cord on his jacket from yesterday. He sat well on the throne, his posture strong and immovable. He made a properly regal impression.

Lord Hand Arryan had a wooden chair to sit upon on the platform. Also on the platform was a seat for the Queen, judging from the rampant carved lions on it, but she was absent this day.

At the moment, the Stokeworths, Rosbys, and other such Crownlands lords were standing at the fore.

"Your Houses have all been individually notified prior to this day's session," Robert spoke out and his jovial bellow was moderated to a calm, though still resonant tone that was clearly heard in the throne room. "And this pronouncement is to make it clear for all others in the throne room and to be let known in King's Landing. The new four field system of farming and the introduction, education on operation and maintenance, and subsequent usage of the improved tools such as seed drills, harvesters, and threshers is now mandatory for the Crownlands lords and their bannerman. The proof of effectiveness of these new methods was already observed in multiple harvests in the Reach. In the case of smallfolk laborers who lose work and incomes, King's Landing guild masters are ordered to send out journeymen to seek out apprentices in all sorts of trades. Unrest is to be anticipated and addressed with different

work opportunities for those in need. Change for the better prosperity of the Crownlands. So I declare, make it so.”

Lord Rosby coughed.

The reception of this decree was also subdued with the others; it made sense given that they were previously told. From last night he knew that the court was different; the miasma of fear and rictus grins in effort to hide their fear was gone. Conversations were in normal tones, not brief and whispered with looks over shoulders, a result of King Aerys’ paranoia.

And then there was this decree itself. He had not thought that Robert Baratheon cared so much about farming. Yet here it was, a decree that affected change in the name of farming. Perhaps this was Lord Arryn’s idea, in truth. It could very much be so.

All in all, this was no grandiose nonsense like an underground canal to make Dorne green. It was practical, sensible, doable. It wasn’t stupid.

It all probably wasn’t Robert’s idea at all.

Doran would say that the commonplace had its place in a ruler’s rulings. Oberyn supposed it was so. He watched Lord Arryn; the sedate man’s attention to the other decrees and petitions for that day did not wane and the scribes placed at his side kept on writing, again with those writing instruments without ink pots.

King Robert did shift every so often, flexing his feet at the ankles or tapping his toes or gripping at one of the sword pommels that made up the armrests of the throne. But he kept steady and did not cut himself on the throne.

So long as the King and the Hand were in accord, there would be precious little weakness to exploit.

Hmm.

Oberyn excused himself from the throne room and made his way to his lodgings to take a nap. He would need to be refreshed in preparation for dinner.

King's Landing: A Dinner Party at Lord Arryn's

The dinner with the Lord Hand and Master of Ships and their wives would be a careful affair. Oberyn knew at this stage that of course he would not get any answers that he seeks; he must be friendly and feign not being as dangerous as he is. He must pretend that House Martell does not still disapprove of the new regime, built on the blood of his sister, his nephew, and niece. Oberyn would be very bored indeed, despite making Lady Arryn blush with his winks and smiles, if it weren't for Lady Baratheon's presence.

He had supposed that she would be gracious, perhaps flirtatious in the Reach manner. Innuendo was allowed, so long as it was flowery (sometimes literally if you dealt with the Tyrells or other plant obsessed Houses like the Redwynes or Fossaways) and graceful. He had thought that perhaps she would even be somewhat quiet in disposition, as silent as she was at court. She was not. This difference was something to remember.

It was not so much a surprise that here, outside of the eyes of the court she was lively and her friendship with Lady Lysa a genuine thing as they spoke to each other.

"Have you changed your mind, Lysa? Do say yes," Selyse smiled at Lady Arryn.

Lady Lysa shook her head and glanced at Oberyn.

"I am not in ill health. Yet I am in no practice and it would not be seemly."

Lady Selyse made a graceful shrug of her shoulders.

"Very well, my friend. Then it will be I with my brothers that will have the victory."

"Just you and your brothers?" Stannis made a low growl.

Oberyn didn't know what they are talking about but the timbre of that voice makes him cross his legs under the table.

Selyse looked at Stannis fully, her eyes merry.

"Of course you are important too, my love. As good as any goalie as I could wish! You won't deny me a chance at victory by scoring instead of a draw by denying the other team points, surely?"

"... That's so," Stannis finally agreed.

Lady Selyse nodded and then turned to explain to Oberyn the circumstances of a friendly match of an outdoor game called soccer, apparently invented at Brightwater Keep. Oberyn had not thought that the Andals would judge it seemly for women to be running about, but as it was a family game of Lady Selyse's and a private game at that, it must be the excuse. He found out that Renly Baratheon missed playing the game with the younger Florents and Samwell Tarly (they were away on a visit to Horn Hill and Brightwater Keep) and in a bid to

cheer her good brother up, Selyse suggested to play the game. Renly was happy and insisted on recruiting his own team while Selyse set about finding hers.

As of now, for sure Stannis would serve as her goalie, her brothers would be forwards while she would be a midfielder. Renly would expect to be a forward and he managed to get Dale Seaworth to serve as a goalie. Selyse was trying to get Lysa Arryn to join her team to no avail.

Stannis volunteers that it seems that cousin Andrew Estermont has agreed to join Renly's team. If Renly cannot convince more pages or squires to join up, it will look like the rest of his team will be Seaworths, who are new to the game also.

Given that they will be facing the Florents, who invented the game, it is very unlikely that Renly's team will win. Unless, Selyse suggests, Renly will concede to practicality and ask Alekyne to join his team. She has not asked Alekyne yet, hoping that Renly is wise enough now to seek out advantages like that. Stannis tilted his head in consideration.

Lord Arryn looks on, a not entirely comfortable expression on his face as Selyse and Stannis go on, considering who is most like to end up on Renly's team.

"Do they do this often, Lady Arryn? Play at this game?"

"Mostly the Florents do," she replied. "Selyse played much when a maid, and often against her lady cousins. When they are not about, she plays against her brothers. Lord Stannis is not practiced, but as goalies are the only players allowed to use their hands to catch, he is well as a goalie if needed."

"How is the game like? Is it fast? Strenuous?"

"It can be. There are moments of mad sprinting if the ball gets kicked far, but it stops and starts."

"And you do not play it, my lady?" Oberyn tilted his head.

Lysa blushed and giggled.

"I would but not against the boys and men. No, it is well for me to play against Delena or Selyse by herself. Though the game forbids the touching of other players, I find it intimidating to play against the boys. I expect that is why the Florent ladies are such fine dancers, though. They took exercise for women much more seriously."

She leaned in a little.

"I suspect that may be why the Florents are so... successful at becoming mothers. Melessa Tarly has borne three already, Rhea Royce has two, and see how Selyse is right now? It has been five moons since little Armand was born and she is ready for a game!"

Lady Lysa looked at Selyse with undisguised admiration.

"Who do you think will win, then? Shall we make a wager?" Oberyn smiled.

“Oh-!” Lysa giggled. “I do not gamble! But I do think Selyse’s team will win. Even if Renly is wise enough to ask Alekyne to join him, that still leaves Lord Stannis as goalie. He would block most or all of the attempted kicks to goal, I am sure of it.”

Oberyn was interested in watching this upcoming game and asked if he might do so. Selyse agreed and said that the game would be held in a field Renly asked King Robert to have cleared for the purpose at the edge of the Red Keep’s Godswood.

The dinner continued in this light and easy manner, where eventually all conversation came from Selyse’s questions to him about his time in the Citadel, his memories of Essos as a sellsword, and of Dorne itself. She is delightfully well read and what’s more, she listened fully to his answers; no mere small talk and courtesies for him. It was a heady feeling to be questioned so charmingly by a woman and Oberyn could not help preening and boasting more than his wont about his exploits in Essos.

Lord Stannis was not very interested in what Oberyn had to say about the Citadel. Even less for the carnal pleasures to be found in Lys (though Oberyn had to abbreviate a little, for Lady Lysa was looking shocked. Typical. On the other hand, Lady Selyse was not affronted by his recounting. And that- That boded very well. Oberyn could just purr at that!) but he was interested by the accounts of the sellsword companies in the Disputed Lands. The both of them, looking at him, asking him smart and practical questions, that was really something!

Where Lady Selyse was interested in the Valyrian dialects of the Free Cities and the routes that travelers took between the the cities and the kinds of tradestuffs that could be found, Lord Stannis was more comfortable inquiring after the size and capabilities of various sellsword companies, of troop discipline and movement, of how it was possible to keep supplied in the Disputed Lands, and how much it would take to conquer any one of the cities.

Lord Hand Arryn listened with forbearance; no doubt he sees Oberyn as some hotheaded young pup and remembers the temporary banishment that Doran had to exact after that annoying difficulty with Yronwood. He did make a few lordly huffs of scorn over the faithlessness of sellswords. But Lord Stannis made no such judgements, his gaze strong and knowing.

“To what end do you ask about the strength of companies, Lord Stannis? You do not ask me these questions idly.”

“I expect some who are unconvinced by the Greyjoy Rebellion and will seek to test the forces of the Crown.”

“But you were so clearly victorious,” Oberyn smiled and leaned forward. “T’would be foolish, no?”

“Nobody ever lost money betting on the idiocy of others,” Stannis replied and his matter of fact tone made Oberyn laugh.

And Lady Selyse’s merry merry smirk made it all the sweeter.

“The Stepstones will inevitably serve as launching points of distraction,” Stannis continued. “Which is all well and good. Marines need to be blooded. But if anyone tries for more than trifling sellsails, then they must be... hammered down. Expeditiously.”

“It has not come to my attention before that you are so enthusiastic for battle, like your brother,” Oberyn raised an eyebrow.

“Fail to plan and one plans to fail,” Stannis growls and Oberyn once again has to cross his legs under the table. “We will not be caught unaware if I can help it.”

“Here, here,” Lord Arryn raises his goblet.

Oberyn leaned back in his seat, raising his goblet as well.

“To the Royal Fleet,” he said.

So the Baratheons, or at least the Master of Ships, are not overconfident about the dynasty’s hold over the seven kingdoms.

Do they think that Dorne is a place to watch over? Must be, if Lord Arryn extended his invitation to dinner so soon after Oberyn showed up at court. With the Iron Islands pacified, Dorne must be the most obvious next potential source of unrest. It is only polite, in that Andal way, to let your opponent know that you know about them in the first place.

Oberyn will have to take care with passing this news on to Doran. Perhaps the Spider is already spreading out his flock of Little Birds while Oberyn is sitting here, eating dinner.

Doran’s instincts are correct this time; they cannot afford to assume anything about this court. The decadent violence and personal paranoia of King Aerys has been replaced by people who are sane and clear eyed. It would be... quite the challenge.

“And what does King Robert think?”

“... Whatever may come, he is ready and willing to enter the battlefield. One hopes that the Greyjoy Rebellion has made others more wise.”

Ah, a warning! And not even subtle at that! Oberyn smiled.

Lord Arryn cleared his throat and the conversation had to move on.

Lord Arryn, given his age, must retire earlier. He kissed Lady Arryn and takes his leave. Lady Arryn offers to teach him the favorite table game of hers; a card game called Mere. Oberyn agrees and Lord and Lady Baratheon join the game. This necessitates that they sit closer together around a smaller table, which suits Oberyn immensely. He chooses to sit across from Lady Arryn and with the absence of Lord Arryn, while Lord and Lady Baratheon who sit to his right and left.

“Is it possible at all for me to board the Fury? I have heard much praise about the improvements to the fleet. And perhaps get a taste of the glory that passed me by with the ending of the Greyjoy Rebellion.”

“It’s possible. It is also not permitted,” Lord Stannis set down a card.

“But are you not the captain? I think I would enjoy it very much to be welcomed... aboard.”

“I am not the captain,” Stannis objected. “It is particularly under my orders as Master of Ships because it is the flagship.”

“I see. And yet, perhaps you can still receive me, no?”

“Put down a card, it’s your turn,” Lord Stannis replied.

“It seems your husband is more hospitable to you, my lady,” he addressed Lady Selyse after choosing a card to put down.

“He does need to allow me aboard in order to get to Dragonstone,” Selyse replied.

“Then would you receive me, in Dragonstone?”

“You know Dragonstone already,” Selyse laid down a card.

“Yet I do not know you,” Oberyne smiled at her.

“There’s knowing and then there’s knowing, my lord,” Selyse tilted her head.

“And how would you like to know me?”

“Oh, there are so many ways,” Selyse’s tone was amused and whimsical. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“You prefer the empirical,” Stannis noted, drawing a card.

“That I do.”

“Well, I like the empirical,” Oberyne nodded. “I like many ways. Empirical. Spiritual. Sensual.”

“Would be difficult to be empirical if one didn’t use the senses,” Stannis took a sip of lemon water and was forced by a play by Lysa to draw four.

Oberyne pursed his lips at the interruption and Selyse smirked.

Lady Arryn was a competitive player despite him being new at the game and aggressively pursued a win, giggling every once in a while when Oberyne dared to be more than oblique with his flirtations.

Lord Stannis showed no signs of being an anxious, jealous husband, which was very encouraging indeed! He listened in on Oberyne’s conversation with Lady Selyse with no change to his expression. And when Oberyne smiled at him, he maintained that same composure.

Eventually, Lady Arryn wrest a win and cheerfully bid them all a good evening and left.

“Prince Oberyn,” Lord Stannis spoke again. “Was it enough, for us to give you Ser Gregor and Ser Armory?”

Oberyn did not pause in drinking his wine, but only just.

“You have my thanks,” Oberyn replied. “If it was truly your doing, Lord Stannis...?”

“I never approved of Lord Lannister’s methods of seeking Robert’s favor, or what happened to the royal family,” Lord Stannis growled. “But I was yet powerless to effect justice on the matter at that time.”

So there is actually a divide between the brothers. Interesting. Though not surprising. Everybody knows of how Lord Baratheon chopped off Ser Davos Seaworth’s fingers himself. The man’s adherence to justice is a most distinguishing characteristic.

“And you have that power now, Master of Ships,” Oberyn raised his glass to Lord Stannis.

“Barely. It was leverage. Using the least amount of force necessary to move the more stubborn opposing party.”

“For all that you disapprove of Lord Lannister, King Robert favored him with Iron Islands mining rights,” Oberyn raises his eyebrows. “That is generous of him.”

“The Iron Islands need their mines to be bettered. The Lannisters can do so, with their own funds. It is not on the Crown to do such a thing. Especially when it has been negotiated that the Crown and its agents may procure ores at discounted government rates,” Lady Selyse explained.

“We also do not protest the deployment of sufficient numbers of Red Cloaks to assist in maintaining law and order on the Iron Islands by the Royal Fleet. I do not trust that the Iron Island Lords are even aware of how to properly keep the King’s peace, considering that there is a new King. Lord Lannister does,” Lord Stannis finished.

Lady Selyse is well versed on her husband’s and the Small Council’s policies. Oberyn is surprised. He had not thought that Lord Stannis would be so welcoming of a woman’s opinion in these matters. It is refreshingly Rhoynish an attitude. He does not trust them, he cannot. But he is beginning to like these Baratheons in particular.

“You are not only here to thank us for the delayed justice for the murders of your kin,” Lord Baratheon stated. “You thank us. But you are not satisfied.”

“Why wouldn’t I be satisfied?” Oberyn tilted his head. “You have given me the killers of my sister and my nephew and niece.”

“I wouldn’t be satisfied,” Lord Baratheon bluntly replied. “Those two were just the catspaws. You want Lord Tywin Lannister. It is entirely understandable.”

Oberyn’s jaw dropped open and he jerked upright in his seat.

“Wha-”

“King Aerys caused the death of my parents. I have been waiting for a very long time,” Lord Stannis continued with that same, now unsettling, calm.

Oh. Oh, Oberyn thinks. He smiles, buying a few moments of time.

That futile mission to Essos, searching for a Valyrian bride for Prince Rhaegar. Surely he cannot think that a ship foundering in a storm is King Aerys’ fault. But he sees in those blue eyes and the set of his jaw an implacable resentment. It is not the storm, but putting his parents in that position at all that fuels his anger. How very Rhoynish indeed, to hold a grudge that long!

He exhales and takes a drink.

“And now your brother sits on the Iron Throne. Are you satisfied?”

“There is a certain satisfaction that Aerys was slain by the son of his once close friend Tywin. After Aerys killed off his other close friend,” Lord Stannis’ voice gives no impression of pleasure. “And that the son of that slain close friend in particular sits on the Throne. After said son killed off Aerys’ son, the Prince. A symmetry, if you will.”

“I do not know you well, Lord Stannis. But I would guess that you are not satisfied.”

“I want the peace and prosperity of the realm. If it must be that the ship of state comes under the captainship of my House, then it is a duty to steer it out of danger and into safe harbor. Should the dynasty of my House do better than House Targaryen, that would be vindication. I do not expect to know such vindication in my lifetime, of course. It is up to historians to decide.”

“... and Lord Lannister is well known for maintaining peace. And the Westerlands are prosperous,” Oberyn concluded.

They must tolerate and approve of him for pragmatic, if not moral, reasons.

“Want to know what I think? Lord Tywin ignores so many scions of his family tree. As a Reacher, I would say that is most foolish. Bad fruit come from diseased growth. I daresay he will not like the yield he gets from his preferred stock,” Lady Selyse slowly said, after catching his eye.

The Queen does not have an ally, much less a friendship, with Lady Selyse. Between the disapproval Lord Stannis evinced in regards to Lord Tywin and this, the terrain of court is becoming more and more clear.

“I defer to your opinion as a Reacher in the matters of... gardening. By what way have you judged that growth diseased?”

“That woman. Insults my wife,” Lord Stannis cuts in.

Ah. Things are very personal indeed!

“We intend to be patient. Does Dorne?” Lord Stannis asked.

Oberyn circled the rim of his goblet with a finger, thinking.

“I am impatient,” he said, finally. “But Doran, Doran is very patient. He can wait the way I cannot. It does help that you gave us the direct murderers of my kin. I am content.”

Lord Stannis inclined his head.

“Acceptable. Especially as there must always be a Warden of the West. Continued peace is imperative.”

But it need not always be Lord Tywin Lannister, Oberyn smiled in understanding. In fact, they may not even stand in the way should anything untoward happen to Lord Tywin. If they aren't lying.

“We spoke of investments, over dinner,” Lord Stannis took to a new topic. “How they can be considered a form of gambling.”

“And you are willing to gamble, if the cause is not frivolous. I recall. You do not care for tourney betting or any such things. You did not elaborate on what it is that you might be interested in wagering on.”

“It is truly a question of patience and waiting,” Lady Baratheon says, meditatively. “Wines are aged and you cannot tell until the uncorking what the grapes have gifted you. It's that uncertainty that makes being patient worth it all, wouldn't you say? The gamble is in that. I don't much like the 276 vintage, myself. Bad year.”

“Ah? And what vintage interests you?”

“284 might be a most interesting year. Too early to tell right now; it must age for a while longer yet. Shall you like to discuss your opinion on the matter as the time draws near?”

Oberyn sits back in his seat, to consider. Prince Viserys and Princess Danaerys. Do they mean to find her, perhaps marrying her to Prince Joffrey? Lend further legitimacy to the Baratheon dynasty by fresh infusion of royal bloodline. It is entirely reasonable, barring King Robert's notorious hatred of all things Targaryen. But then, they do have years yet, to patiently wear him down to the idea. Can they succeed? Who can say? It seems that they wish to do as Doran does and wait, which means leaving the exiles be until the right time. Do they mean to assassinate the Prince? Oberyn doesn't know; perhaps Lord Stannis' disapproval of the murders of Prince Aegon and Princess Rhaenys extends to disapproving of assassination in general. Or, they plan something else. Who can say?

Lord Baratheon and his wife do not approve of Lord Tywin Lannister. They have managed to acquire enough power at court to affect the giving over of his catspaws to House Martell, in the name of justice that Lord Baratheon hews to so strongly. They have let House Martell know because House Martell itself is against House Lannister. Or, more specifically, Lord Tywin Lannister.

They have revealed to him interest in the exiled Targaryens.

A dangerous game, with dangerous play. Oberyn wondered, what could House Martell squeeze from these Dragonstone Baratheons in return for silence on the possibly treasonous matter of the Targaryens? Is it even a true thing, that they care about the Targaryens, more than simply wanting them dead the way King Robert does?

“Discuss vintages? Why not?”

“Of course. In the fullness of time. We understand each other, then? Being from two kingdoms known for... winemaking?”

Oberyn smiled and lifted his wine glass; he has a little remaining. Lady Selyse followed suit with her own and Lord Stannis with his cup of lemon water.

“To well-aged wine.”

“In the fullness of time,” Lady Selyse echoed and they drank.

Oberyn smiled and they all exit Lord Arryn’s chambers. They parted, entering their own litters and going separate ways past the main gate of the Red Keep.

King's Landing: The Biggest Secret

Stannis and Selyse said nothing to each other until they were safely alone in their chambers. He stopped and extended his arm, holding onto her hand. She looked at him, twitching an eyebrow up in acknowledgement and he reeled her in, spinning her like when they danced and caught her, embraced her tightly and kissed her, inhaling her.

“That man presumes much,” Stannis finally said. “I do not like the way he looked at you. I do not!”

“Stannis,” Selyse hummed, nuzzling into his neck.

They stood like that for a while.

“... He flirted with you too,” Selyse said.

Stannis blinked. And blinked. And then he squinted in realization. Selyse stifled a giggle.

“He is strange,” Stannis concluded.

Selyse was still watching him.

“I didn’t give credence to the tales about the Dornish Vice,” he shook his head. “But it is clear that those who partake are very strange.”

“No, Stanny Blue Eyes. He can see that you are comely too, in your own way. It is not so strange that he would try to flirt with you. Good taste, I’d say.”

Stannis harrumphed in disbelief. Selyse kissed his cheek.

“No more of your compliments, Selyse. I mean to speak seriously with you.”

“He is an incorrigible flirt, but you do know that you have nothing to fear from him, right?”

“It’s not fear,” Stannis’s lip curled at the idea. “It’s the principle. He should not be making eyes at you. You are my wife.”

“And you are my husband,” Selyse replied just as firmly.

Stannis squeezed her hand, pleased all over again for the moment.

“Selyse. I did as you wanted. I mumbled. Which is lying. I do not understand the purpose of drawing that Martell into conversation. I do not understand why you spoke of the Targaryens. It is near treason to do so. You nearly- no- you implicate us. Selyse.”

He watched as that mantle of serene ice smoothed over her features. Her Court Face. That she would do it at this moment with him was... terrible.

“Tell me why.”

“Stannis-”

“Tell me,” Stannis stepped close, trying to soften his voice for a coaxing tone and not quite succeeding.

“Once you know, you can never go back. Once I tell you, you must believe. Stannis, I am afraid. If you don’t believe then-”

Stannis reached out to run his thumb gently over the crease on her brow.

“White Walkers,” he said finally.

The surprised expression on her face, the quickly tamped flare of fear, hurt him.

“You should not drink to excess,” he continued quietly. “You reveal too much in your sleep.”

She did not look away. No, not his Selyse, she was at once too brave and too comfortable with the scope of her hidden secrets. She wouldn’t feel guilt. And, Stannis had come to hope, there was nothing for her to feel guilty of, really.

“You have not denounced me,” Selyse breathed.

“I would not have you fear me. You are most dear to me.”

“I concur with your sentiment.”

They went and sat on the settee, holding hands, both unwilling to and knowing that they must broach the subject.

“Begin at the beginning,” Stannis quoted. “and go on till you come to the end: then stop.”

Selyse smiled finally.

“Alys in Wonderland. How appropriate.”

Her tale, no, her truth about herself, was as fantastical as the most fantastical of her tales. She was the one who has fallen down the rabbit hole? He certainly doesn’t feel like a character in a tale, a mummer’s play. He has just been himself.

“You were of a world where your stories were stories conceived by other persons and where we of Westeros are also stories. You fell down a rabbit hole and now you are here in the story. With we of Westeros,” Stannis summarized afterwards.

“And Essos. This whole world, really.”

“It is difficult to believe,” Stannis said.

“Yes. But do you have any other explanation for the way I am?”

Stannis had to admit that Selyse was always odd. Her tales were varied in the telling but there were common threads throughout that he could not pass off as artistic choice. She had the serenity and soft spoken courtesies of a lady, yet there was a mature core of steel in her bearing. It was... not that of a woman in the blush of youth. If that could be simply explained by her being an entire different person... But it was too strange.

“It is most reasonable to think that you are simply odd. Your claims of coming from another world, of me being just a character is outlandish.”

There was silence, as she marshalled her arguments in her mind and Stannis waited for it. He wanted to be fair to her and he promised himself to be patient months ago.

“Nobody has ever told me about Proudwing,” Selyse finally said. “Not even you.”

Of all the things he might have expected her to say, this was not it.

“You know my foolishness,” Stannis cannot help the growl, the bite of disappointment and shame.

“I know that a stubborn, patient, loving boy cared for an injured bird beyond what others could do. I know that birds when sick often die rather than show any such weakness. That she became well under your care was wonderful. You are wonderful.”

“But she wasn’t well! She never soared high, it was a waste-”

“Stannis,” Selyse placed her hand to his jaw, gently urging him to cease his grinding. “Please.”

“... Speak, then.”

“Could she hunt, after it all? Could she do it?”

“... Yes.”

“Then by the unforgiving laws of the wild, she is well. Animals do not care about glory, only what works, what allows them to survive. She did not need to fly high to feed herself.”

She paused.

“There is also the fact that it wasn’t fair to compare a goshawk to a gyrfalcon. They are two completely different hunters.”

Stannis said nothing, listening.

“Wild goshawks do not soar over open fields and stooping to strike prey on the wing like falcons. That is not their way. Their wings are shorter and broader compared to the long span of falcons, compared to their bodies. They can turn on the wing quickly. They hunt from a perch. They find a tall tree, watch for a passing rabbit or grouse, and only then do they drop down; zigzagging back and forth between the narrow spaces of the tree trunks and knocking their prey down upon the ground from behind. She did that, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“In the open fields, she couldn’t catch a grouse or duck on the wing, did she?”

“No.”

“That’s so. It’s not that she was a poor hunter. It’s that what humans expected her to do was not something she could. That is the fault of human expectation. It wouldn’t be fair to turn a falcon loose in the middle of a dense wood and expect such long-winged birds to twist their way past branches to snatch a squirrel from a trunk.”

Stannis shrugged. Selyse rubbed his shoulder.

“Robert was also a real asshole mocking her with that name. That was entirely uncalled for, as you know,” she added.

Stannis harrumphed.

“And so. I knew this of you. That you are stubborn and good. Able to heal without prompting by others. Girls grow up with all sorts of romantic dreams for a husband. But that was only afforded to pretty girls. I knew that a maiden’s dreams were not for the likes of I. I made peace with that and hoped for someone of sense and duty. I knew that should I be married to you, even if we did not suit, even if you did not like me, at the least you would not harm me-”

“Never,” Stannis growled, squeezing her hand.

“Then do you believe me, that I am what I say I am?”

“... It seems that I must do so.”

“So. I know certain facts. I know that the Martells hate Lord Tywin very much and that they will take any opportunity to get vengeance. They will do so through hurting the Baratheons if they must. They would hurt anybody at all if they get desperate. And we must not give them any openings to do so. We must be on guard.”

“And the Targaryens?”

“I expect for them to do more than fade into obscurity in Essos. They will be to Westeros as the Blackfyres if we do not take care.”

Stannis drummed his fingers.

“... So you let the Martells know that we are watching the Targaryens especially so that they don’t try... anything?”

“It’s one precaution.”

“And if they dare anyway?”

“Then it can only be expected and planned for, you see.”

Stannis nodded.

“Selyse. How much time do you have?” he squeezed her hand again, this time urgently.
“When must you return out the rabbit hole?”

And she blinked.

“... I don’t know. I don’t know, Stannis.”

Stannis made an inarticulate bark of distress, embracing her.

“Oh, Stannis. I know. I don’t wish to leave before my time.”

They sat silently for a time.

“Were you... highborn also, where you came from?”

She shook her head.

“No. Definitely not. My family were what you call smallfolk.”

Stannis raised his eyebrows.

“And yet your courtesies...”

“Learned from my second childhood with the Florents. And before that, I was quite a reader anyway. I loved the stories of ruling, politics, war, and intrigues. You must have heard of the plays of mummers that Braavosi enjoy? Hours in length with coherent stories?”

Stannis nodded.

“My world had the same. It was the entertainment source for everybody and the stories were so involved, that they didn’t finish in a night. If you choose, you could return night after night, to view the mummers at their work, as they recreated the drama of great families contesting for power. It is part of the reason I even know of this world; the story played out for the Iron Throne was very popular. Once a sevenday, hundreds of thousands would watch this very story be acted out.”

Stannis crinkled his brow.

“How? Hundreds of thousands at the same time?”

“Technology. Well. You know how a mirror reflects an image as a temporary copy? Or how an echo follows the first sound?”

“Yes.”

“The people of my world learned how to capture moving images and sound for longer than the moment of a mirror or an echo. I would sit at home and watch the mummers work their

art from a flat glass-like surface. It was as if I was in front of a glass window and I was the silent witness to the mummers on the other side of that window.”

Stannis could barely imagine what it meant.

“Is it common for your people to fall down rabbit holes?”

Selyse shrugged.

“I thought not. And yet. There are stories about it happening to others. Imagination? Or recounting from those who left and got back home? Was there really an Alys? A Dorothy? There are even rules about what to do when entering other worlds. Everybody thinks it’s just... tale telling. But what if those rules exist because that’s just something that happens enough for there to be rules? I don’t know.”

“What rules can there be?”

“Depends on where you end up. It is said that one ought to follow the Prime Directive: noninterference with the natural progress and natural development of alien civilizations.”

“I assume you have ignored this.”

Selyse nodded ruefully.

“Prime Directive is an ideal. Knowing what I know, knowing the White Walkers are coming? I cannot stand by and not try to fight for the living.”

“If you know how it all ends, what is the point of changing the story, of changing our lives? My life?”

“You? I love you. How could I not?”

Stannis swallowed and leaned in to kiss her.

“I could not stand by and let hundreds of thousands die just because the first story allowed it so. I have already begun to change the story. I am not just a character within the story I once knew. Soon, the story will change far beyond the story I first knew. I have been working towards this since I was a child. I had not thought that I could succeed. Except-”

And here, she squeezed his hand.

“The Greyjoy Rebellion,” she whispered. “I changed it.”

“You knew that it would happen. So the ideas for the immediate improvements to the Royal Fleet-”

She nodded in confirmation. Stannis was speechless.

“The Greyjoys would rebel again ten years into the future, give or take, despite losing the first time. Balon Greyjoy was behind it, having learned nothing. He had to die. Now that he is

dead, it means that the story truly is mine, ours, to change. Our choices have meaning. There is no Fate.”

Stannis considered the matter.

“Do your kin know?”

“They suspect that there is more to my work than just peace and prosperity and the betterment of the world with inventions. I have not told all of them the truth of myself. But they trust in me and I trust in them. Of all of them, Imry and Erren know for sure because they figured it out and approached me themselves. I suspect that Uncle Colin suspects.”

“And there are White Walkers. You fear them because they are in the story and it cannot be written away?”

“Yes.”

“You cannot have known this is...” Stannis paused in distaste. “A story without writing it down. The way you did with your other tales.”

Selyse nodded. She went over to a chest at the foot of the bed that ordinarily held bed linens. She knelt in front of it and pressed on a false panel, revealing a spring loaded drawer that popped forward from the false bottom. She brought out a stack of notebooks. She chose one and opened it.

“There is the story. And then there are the characters. Me. You. There are things that were done that are... most dishonorable.”

“How dishonorable?”

She looked at him with such compassion.

“Kinslaying.”

Stannis scowled.

“... What? Do I usurp the Usurper in your story? Was your Lion King a warning? A clue? A jape at my expense?”

She rushed back to his side and dropped the notebooks on his lap and quickly embraced him.

“No. The choice came from being backed into a corner. It was a terrible choice because the story demanded it. The story had to go a certain way. Characters appeared on stage and say their lines.”

“And I am written, fated to kill my brother.”

“There is no fate!” Selyse insisted. “Look!”

She brought the notebook she opened first to his hand. He huffs but takes it to read.

Selyse Florent, it said across the top of the page. There was a simple list in her handwriting.

Eldest child of Ryam Florent. Tall, plain and ugly, grew a moustache. Unpleasant personality. Unfriendly. No friends. Entered an arranged marriage to Stannis Baratheon. Miscarried at least three trueborn sons one after another. Gave birth at last to one sole living child, a girl named Shireen Baratheon. Wallowed in disappointment over her fertility problems and failure to provide a male heir. Marriage to Stannis Baratheon one of coldness, mutual dislike, and disappointment. Turned into a fanatical convert to the Essosi religion of R'hllor in a bid for personal fulfillment. Possibly also believed that there was a solution to her infertility in foreign religions. So fanatical that the ordering of various of her Florent kin to die by burning as sacrifices to the god by a Red Priestess did not shake her faith. Stood by as more and more were burned until the Red Priestess ordered and conducted the burning of her only child, Shireen, as a sacrifice to R'hllor. Finally overcome with grief and guilt at being a totally shitty mother, died by hanging herself.

It was brutal. Stannis nearly threw the notebook across the room at the sudden anger that took hold of him.

“That is not you,” he finally managed to say, after Selyse put her hand to his jaw, silently reminding him to cease grinding his teeth. “You would never- Armand-”

“He is a gift. I am not the Selyse of the Story (and he can hear how she emphasizes that word) to take the slings and arrows of misfortune and mouth the same lines and do the same things. Yet I could do nothing but wait and hope as I carried him. When he came out alive-”

She tightened her embrace around his shoulders.

“He is not just an heir. Whatever probabilities were at work within me as I carried, they landed on Yes. I cannot take that for granted.”

Stannis nodded. He took a fortifying breath and went to the table of contents. He found his name and opened the relevant page. A kinslayer. Was that the worst of it? He began to read.

Middle child of Lord Steffan Baratheon. Has the Baratheon physical traits. Bald by 298. (What.) Notable levels of stubbornness and adherence to personal code of justice and duty. A Determinator; once set on a course of action, dependably going to press on no matter the cost. Therefore, more dangerous than average if pointed in the wrong direction. With the right cause, supported by the right allies, greatly effective. Held Storm's End through the siege during Robert's Rebellion. Likely has long term trauma from this event. Observe for cases of disordered eating. (What?) Ordered to go after the Targaryens on Dragonstone. Failed as they escaped before he made the landing. King Robert made him Lord of Dragonstone instead of Storm's End. Saw it as an insult. Story analysis hypothesized that King Robert did not mean it as an insult. Entered into arranged marriage with Selyse Florent. Marriage started off badly when King Robert seduced and had sex with Delena Florent on the marriage bed while drunk during the wedding. (WHAT) Marriage circumstances never improved afterwards. Made Master of Ships. Smashed the Greyjoy Rebellion. Essentially ran the Small Council along with Lord Jon Arryn. Both brothers tried his patience over years by being irresponsible shits. (Both?) Discovered along with Jon Arryn that King Robert had no trueborn children due to Cersei's cheating. (WHAT)

When Jon Arryn was murdered because of a conspiracy, fled to Dragonstone to begin rallying banners. Cersei was done hiding her cheating and had King Robert killed. (WHAT) Prince Joffrey crowned. Ned Stark attempted like an idiot to confront Cersei and ended up getting executed publicly after completely underestimating Lannister power at court. (Well, if she can order the murder of Robert...) Stannis sent off ravens declaring Joffrey a bastard of incest. (WHAT) Declared himself King Stannis etc. etc. as next trueborn Baratheon in proper succession. Got majorly pissed off when Renly declared himself a competing contender to the Iron Throne (What) because he was a little shit who was seduced by Loras Tyrell (WHAT) and was promised Tyrell backing for his bid for the throne. (What) Robb Stark rallied the North and rode south to avenge his father and rescue hostage sisters from King's Landing, ending up hailed as King of the North by his shitty bannermen. (What) Balon Greyjoy declared himself King as well and began yet another rebellion.

War of Five Kings popped off. Red Priestess of R'hllor and Shadowbinder of Asshai in his retinue claimed that he was a prophesied Prince That Was Promised that would save the world. (NONSENSE) Started burning people on Dragonstone as sacrifices. (WHAT) Unsuccessful parley with Renly, where Renly stubbornly refused to bend the knee because of ambition and idiocy in general. Conducted some whackadoo sex magic ritual (WHAT) with Red Priestess (WHAT) that results in her birthing a magical Shadow Assassin (WHAT) that goes off and kills Renly (WHAT). It is unclear if the Red Priestess told Stannis exactly how 'Renly won't be in your way anymore' would happen. Either way. Kinslaying was the opening move.

Consolidated Dragonstone, Stormlands, Reach troops and made an assault on King's Landing. Repelled and defeated by burning wildfire caches poured into the Blackwater (Huh) used by Lord Hand Tyrion Lannister (Huh) which destroyed most of his fleet, which allowed Lannister troops time to reach King's Landing. Retreated to Dragonstone. Received message of wildling army massing on the Wall from the Night's Watch. Sailed north to secure the Wall from the wildlings and gain allegiance from the North, since Robb Stark followed his father and got himself killed during the conflict. (Figures) Made contact with Night's Watch. Won battle against wildlings. Found out that while the Starks were busy getting themselves killed the Boltons have taken Winterfell, backed by the Lannisters. (Of course) Trapped at the Wall by a blizzard. Red Priestess insisted that she can magically end the blizzard and give him a victory against the Boltons, so long as he sacrifices his only child Shireen to the flames. (NO) Blizzard made staying at the Wall untenable position. Boltons were on the march. Gave the order, sacrificed his daughter to burning to death by pyre. (FUCK) This final sacrifice caused at least half of his remaining forces to desert. Battled the Boltons and lost against their fresher, cold-hardy Northern forces. Died.

In conclusion, Stannis the Mannis was the only sane and useful commander who also gave a damn about the Seven Kingdoms and he probably would have been a good king (oh, Selyse) for the coming Long Night, if it weren't for the shitty Red Priestess being totally wrong about him being the Prince That Was Promised and fucking up his plans. However, considering how Danaerys Targaryen had three dragons (WHAT) and hated Baratheons, he would probably have ended up set on fire or eaten anyway when she crossed the Narrow Sea. (WHAT)

Stannis set the notebook aside, shaking his head in bewilderment.

“... I do not know what to say. I don’t like it.”

“Understandable.”

“This Red Priestess...” Stannis’ eyes narrowed. “What do you plan for her?”

“You will need to read the summary of the story,” Selyse picked up the thickest notebook. “She has her place in it, right to the very end.”

“So that murdering, corrupting witch wasn’t brought to justice?” Stannis grit his teeth. “Life is not a song, indeed.”

“So long as the both of us are aware of what she really wants then she cannot work her art on us. I always knew you were not the Prince That Was Promised. That’s the nature of prophecies here. Those who follow it most zealously are the most likely to fuck it up. It’s all a distraction from the biggest and only goal we have.”

Stannis opened the largest notebook to the first page.

“A Song of Ice and Fire, or Night King: the Freezing 2.0. How A Bunch of Shitty Moron Humans Almost Got All of the World Turned Into a Permanent Ice Wasteland Fighting Over the World’s Most Uncomfortable Chair Instead of Killing White Walkers.”

Stannis huffed with a reluctant smile.

“That is overlong for a book title,” he finally said.

Selyse nudged the notebook closed.

“You cannot finish it tonight,” she yawned. “You will soon know as much as I do and we can start planning together.”

She picked up the notebooks and returned them into the chest’s false bottom. They changed out of their clothes into their night clothes and Selyse went to give Armand a night feeding.

When she returned to bed, Stannis reached for her, kissing her soundly.

“I hope you are not too disturbed by what you have read, besides the Red Priestess and the kinslaying,” Selyse said sleepily. “Considering that I am already working on changing all of that.”

“... I go bald,” Stannis reluctantly mumbled. “Adds insult to injury.”

Selyse’s eyes opened long enough for her to hug him strongly.

“I know. But you’ll always be my Stanny Blue Eyes.”

“Does Robert go bald?”

“... No.”

“Of course,” Stannis muttered. “Nothing bad happens to Robert!”

“He went spectacularly to seed with food and drink and ends up murdered by Cersei. That’s a shitty way to go.”

“... I suppose.”

Selyse made a sympathetic pursing of her lips.

“People where I come from refer to him as Fat Bob. Blobby B.”

Stannis’ brows crinkled and he blinked.

“Robert became fat. Impossible.”

“Well, there wasn’t anybody encouraging him to spend every day training Royal Marines, Gold Cloaks, or putting a treadmill in the Small Council Room.”

“I see.”

“I did say when we first met that I aimed to solve problems,” Selyse closed her eyes.

“Yes. Sleep well.”

“Sleep well.”

King's Landing: Game Day

Instead of riding off back to the Red Keep after his morning sparring at the Dragonpit, this time Robert went to the docks. Ser Davos met him at the Dragonpit just before he began his training to tell him that Stannis wanted to meet with him, without the presence of the rest of the Small Council and outside of the Red Keep. Robert didn't know why, but it didn't put him too much out of his way, so he did. He waved at the people as he passed, tossing coins as he went. Passing pairs of Goldcloaks saluted him and he saluted back. When he arrived at the docks, Ser Davos was there.

"Your Grace," Davos bowed. "Lord Stannis requests that you and Ser Barristan only should come aboard. Have the other Kingsguard waiting here, on the dock."

"He does, does he?" Robert turned to look over his shoulder.

That day, it was Ser Jaime, Ser Mandon, and Ser Preston who flanked him along with Ser Barristan.

"Is it only Lord Stannis who wishes to meet?" Ser Barristan asked Davos.

"... Lady Selyse is present as well."

"Ah. Very well," Robert nodded. "Wait here, Sers."

He did wonder at the moment why they were not to meet in the Red Keep godswood, but supposed he would find out soon enough.

Instead of being led to a building or even to one of the Royal Navy galleys, Robert and Ser Barristan followed Ser Davos onto a smaller sailboat. Dale Seaworth was there and once the gangplank was withdrawn, it became clear that it was just Davos and Dale as crew, so small was the sailboat. They cast off, and the little sailboat went. Stannis and Selyse were there waiting.

"Where are we off to?" Robert grinned.

"Just a quick circle in the bay," Selyse replied.

Robert nodded. The sea breeze was refreshing.

"To business, then," Selyse clapped her hands once. "Stannis and I have independently approached Oberyn Martell and through some judicious deniable statements of purposeful vagueness, have found that the Martells are a potential problem that needs watching."

"Going to try to assassinate me, is he?" Robert's grin was confident and a touch bloodthirsty.

"Too obvious. If there's one thing we know is that Doran Martell doesn't want Dorne to be dealt with in worse ways than the Iron Islands."

Robert snorted.

“I believe if you continue with your way, you might just win Oberyne over. It isn’t really you that has roused House Martell’s sense of vengeance, Robert.”

She paused and Robert took that cue to think.

“House Lannister, is it? Going to go after Cersei, instead?”

Robert then frowned.

“Or my son. Joffrey? A prince for the dead prince and princess? I won’t have it!” he made a fist.

“Have multiple food tasters if you like and have a closer look at the kitchen servants if you please,” Stannis nodded. “But it’s Lord Tywin Lannister they are after. Only they cannot attack him or his House directly. They aren’t stupid. Well. At least. Doran Martell isn’t stupid.”

“No, no, that’s right,” Robert nodded. “He wouldn’t want to come off worse than Balon Greyjoy to his people. Jon did his best negotiating. But Dorne did not come out winners during the Rebellion and if it’s one thing you can count on, is Dornishmen coming back when you think they’ve learned their lesson and trying to stab you in the back.”

“Yes, and for that purpose, we must also consider the Targaryens.”

Robert’s nostrils flared.

“One, two, three-” he muttered quickly, up to ten.

He inhaled. Exhaled.

“Go on,” Robert said after.

“Given enough time, money, training and allies, they may well become the Blackfyres to your dynasty. Stannis and I made it seem to Oberyne that we were interested in the futures of the exiles.”

“And why is that?”

“So that the Martells don’t try anything,” Selyse replied. “It wouldn’t take much to have Oberyne go on a so called debauched spending spree in the better whorehouses of Essos on his brother’s coin, while actually sending off said coin into the hands of the children, for example. If they know that the Targaryens are watched, they must be above reproach.”

Robert hummed, thinking.

“And what do the Martells think you two are interested in the Targaryens for?”

“Didn’t say. Leaving it up to their imaginations,” Selyse made an obviously shifty smirk.

“Hah! But really, Selyse! What are your plans?”

Selyse adjusted her shawl. Stannis kept his arms crossed.

“As of yet, no particular plans,” Stannis slowly said. “Selyse made it seem... intriguingly treasonous, our interest. The reality of it must be done with your approval as King, Robert.”

“... Made you seem treasonous. You, Stannis! That takes some trickery, hah!” Robert clapped his hands. “If something treasonous doesn’t happen, you’ll be caught out!”

Selyse tilted her head in agreement.

“We wanted to speak to you so that you know from us for when Lord Varys informs you of that conversation with Oberyn, which we rather did not conceal within the Red Keep. Has he, Robert? Has he done his duty?”

“No, he hasn’t. Huh! Why hasn’t he? Was this a test for him and the Martells? Too clever, Selyse!” Robert grinned.

“That spymaster worked for the Targaryens. He may still have loyalist leanings. If he does not report to you about our encounter with Oberyn, from now on, we must completely distrust his motives. As to any actions on our part, I’ve gotten Oberyn to expect us to wait. Years of it.”

“Robert, what do you wish, regarding the Targaryens?” Stannis asked.

Robert closed his eyes and huffed.

“Well. I’d want them dead. Really secure things. But Jon said killing children’s bad enough to start with what Lord Tywin did and he’s right because now the Martells need to be watched for the expected betrayal or treason, as you tell me. So. They can’t be made dead by our hand or influence.

I want them unable to cause trouble for Westeros in the future. I want them unable to receive assistance from allies, unable to raise armies, unable to invade.”

“Now that, we can work with,” Selyse nodded. “There’s still time.”

“Is there? In what ways?”

“Stannis told me that at last report from Varys, Ser Willem Darry has died in Braavos. Without their last protector, Viserys and Daneyars were driven out of their dwelling into the streets. By some favor and luck they are in Myr. They are staying as guests with some Myrish nobility there.”

“Aye, they are. Your plan?”

“Allies, armies, training, influence. That all takes money. Viserys is thirteen years in age. I would be willing to bet that he doesn’t know a proper thing about money or how it matters for raising armies.”

“Containment. Before that boy spends the patience or curiosity of these Myrish nobles, they should be invited to stay where we can keep long term eye on them,” Stannis concluded.

“I don’t like that. Harboring Targaryens.”

“Keeping them in one place, with limited means, would keep them weak,” Selyse added.

“No. Even if you convince your family to pay for the business so that it doesn’t come from the treasury, even if you manage to do it so that it doesn’t get traced back to you, even if the boy doesn’t grow up into a man that can swing a sword, I do not want that. I declare it forbidden of Stannis, you, and House Florent, as King. Right now.”

Selyse’s lips thinned, but she bowed her head, conceding.

“But you are smart, I’ll grant you. Harboring them? No. Following, watching? Yes. I’ll have Varys watching them. I want whatever other resources you deem necessary to watch them also. If Varys lies, I want to know. If any Essosi think to support them, if any greedy nobles with Valyrian blood think to bet on them by marrying one or the other of them and come for my throne the way the Blackfyres did, I want to know. If any sellsword companies offer... discounted contracts... to them? I want to know.

Anybody thinking they can come and catch us unaware, unready, unarmed? They’ll all learn!”

Robert smacked his fist into the palm of his other hand.

“No assassins. No bounty. They have the benefit of mercy. We will see if they or anybody else in Essos are wise enough to see it as the favor that it is from me. I allow them to live in obscurity. I allow them to live.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Selyse replied, bowing her head again.

Stannis bowed his head as well.

“The Martells will behave if they know what’s good for them. They want to play dumb Dornish games? Well, I don’t have the head for that, but I trust that you two have it in hand. If you need any assistance, any at all, come to me. As for Lord Tywin...”

Robert sighed, disliking having to tread carefully.

“We keep him away from King’s Landing. So long as Jon lives, that will be that. Cersei’s not stopped trying to have her way with appointments, favors, and all that. I would much rather have fewer than more Westermen in the actual working parts of government, obviously.”

“Do you wish for it to be handled? By House Florent?” Selyse perked up.

Robert chuckled.

“I do wonder about you,” he grinned. “Getting all delighted about bureaucracy! Well. Go on, then. Your Uncle Axell and his teams go through everybody on the pay of the treasury with

my permission. With Jon's approval over any major changes. Otherwise, anybody stealing from me gets dealt with at House Florent and Stannis' discretion."

"It will be done, Your Grace."

"Don't look so eager to start chopping off more fingers, Stannis!" Robert grinned.

"... Hah," Stannis replied.

Robert chortled.

Stannis called out to Davos to begin sailing back.

"Are you and Renly finally through with making teams for the soccer match?" Robert asked.

"Renly's decided on mostly Seaworths," Selyse smiled. "Dale, Allard, Mathos. Andrew Estermont's finally agreed to start learning the game. Then it shall be Stannis and I, Imry and Erren, and Delena."

"Delena, now? Really?" Robert raised his brows. "What about Alykene?"

"Referee. He's vowed to be impartial."

"Oho! Did he, now?"

"Yes," Selyse nodded. "I would ask for Ser Barristan to do the honors, but he has duties."

Ser Barristan smiled a little.

"Well, I'll be there to watch, depend upon it. Renly's been so eager about it. And I'll even cheer for you, Stannis! Fair's fair."

"... Thank you," Stannis said. "That shall be the highlight of my day."

"Hah!"

Robert rewarded Stannis for amusing him by punching him on the arm.

The day of the soccer game arrived and Renly was in a manic tear, the responsibility of being team captain for the first time going to his head. Davos joked to Stannis that his sons had been quietly complaining to him about Renly's regime of practice, of how he was set on badgering them into some semblance of competition against the much more experienced Florents. Stannis replied that cousin Andrew was doing the same. As it was, Renly was a bundle of nervous energy and left early for the Red Keep to inspect the prepared field for one more time.

As it was a sevenday, Lord Jon Arryn was available. He accompanied Lysa, who was carrying a little flag she had sewn up just for the occasion. One side had the Florent fox and

the other had the Baratheon stag. As both teams were made up of her friends, Robert supposed that she would spend the entire match waving the flag madly no matter what happened. In fact, because it was a sevenday, more people than expected, who knew of the upcoming game, were making their way to the chairs set up for the occasion along the field. Why, even Ser Axell Florent showed up! He was sitting next to Selyse's mother, Lady Samantha, and they had little Florent banners also to wave.

Robert did let Cersei know that the game was open for spectating, but she sniffed and claimed she was uninterested. He supposed that was all right.

Robert settled into his chair.

And there was Oberyn Martell, the snake, making an appearance. He bowed when Robert waved at him before finding a seat. He was staring at Stannis and Selyse, his eyes switching hungrily back and forth. Ugh.

Robert looked critically at them. Selyse and Delena were wearing loose trousers underneath skirts that ended at their calves. The skirts were split at the back like riding habits and at the sides to their knees so that they could properly run. They looked almost like Dornish boys, as Dornish men wore such robes that came down to the calves. Their hair was braided and coiled around their heads and further secured by wrapping orange scarves over their foreheads that also hid their ears.

The men on the field were wearing orange or black tabards on over plain shirts to tell the teams apart; orange for the Florents and black for Renly's team. Alekyne was wearing a blaring yellow tabard. They were also wearing short trousers cut to their knees. The legs were not more exposed now than from the breeches that were quickly going out of style at court, but the loose cut was different enough to catch attention. Robert grumbled to himself with annoyance. He wasn't worried about Stannis, but it certainly didn't sit right with him to watch Oberyn Martell making eyes at his brother's arse and legs! And he'd better not make eyes at Renly! Robert decided he wouldn't care about what Jon said; if that Martell tried anything he'll black his eye! Or worse! So there!

The most interesting change was the strange shoes made especially for the game. The soles had tacks cobbled onto the bottoms, apparently to give better grip in the dirt. What a funny idea!

"I think they want you to open to the game, Your Grace," Lysa chirped. "Alekyne is looking this way, and everyone is in position."

"Ah? Well," Robert stood. "Are there any ceremonial words?"

"Nobody's played in front of a king before," Lysa said. "We're all rather making it up as we go. But don't be too wordy. Sets a bad precedent."

"I, King Robert Baratheon, First of his Name, Titles, Titles, Titles-"

Jon scoffed and Lysa giggled.

“Do welcome everyone present on this fine day to this field of contest!” Robert boomed.
“Good luck to you all and I declare the game begun!”

The spectators clapped.

“First team to have possession of the ball is decided by coin toss,” Lysa narrated for Jon’s benefit.

It was done and Renly’s team got possession. Alekyne placed the ball in front of Renly, backed away and with a sharp tweet of the whistle, they were off.

Renly was one of the forwards and his part was to actively try to make goals. Imry came loping beside him and they struggled for a time, Renly ably not allowing him to take the ball, until Erren charged in feet first, falling quite on purpose to the ground with no care to injury to himself in order to send the ball flying. Imry was forced to leap high to avoid Erren and Renly stumbled.

“Ooh!” Lysa gasped. “That’s a foul! Foul!”

Alekyne made no move to stop the play.

“Impartial, pfff,” Lysa grumbled. “Renly! Renly!”

She waved her banner.

Renly recovered and chased after the ball, along with a Seaworth. Robert didn’t know who was who amongst the Seaworths. The Seaworth got to the ball first and Renly turned aside. The Seaworth went on with Erren nipping at his heels. Imry was choosing to stick to Renly. The Seaworth was stymied when Selyse charged at him and perhaps it was because he was afraid of making contact with her.

She had no compunctions and took possession of the ball, dribbling for a time before passing it on to Erren. She and Delena were midfielders. Given the small size of the teams, both forwent with dedicated defenders.

Erren charged off madly until Renly tried to get back at him for his daring opening move by doing the same to him. Renly was heavier than Erren and the both of them went tumbling.

“Oh!” Lysa cried.

“Hah!” Robert crowed.

Alekyne’s whistle sounded out.

“What’s happening?” Jon asked.

“It looks like... Renly hit Erren too hard for Alekyne to ignore, so the Florents get a penalty kick.”

The Seaworth goalie stood alone against Imry as the players arranged themselves around the goal.

“It’s really quite unfair,” Lysa said. “But sound strategy. If Erren and Imry can manage to get Renly to lose his temper, he’ll end up hitting them and then they can score without any interference.”

“That’s not in the spirit of a sporting game, surely,” Jon frowned.

“Renly has to control himself then,” Robert shrugged, smiling. “He’s learned a Florent game, he has to expect Florent play.”

Imry made his kick and the Seaworth goalie couldn’t block the ball. Point to Florents.

Renly’s team tried again, this time with the forward Seaworth leading. Another Seaworth went with them, managing to pass between the two of them such that Erren couldn’t take possession while Imry tailed Renly. Delena and Selyse converged on the Seaworths, making their choice.

“Go, Renly!” Lysa suddenly shrieked.

Renly was sprinting and the Seaworth kicked hard, sending the ball far ahead. Imry was running too, but Renly had the start on him. It was enough; Renly gave a mighty kick and the ball shot through the air.

And Stannis leaped up, batting the ball away.

“Oooh!” Lysa cried.

However, one of the Seaworths was waiting for just that and when he made the kick, Stannis was too far away and though he threw himself at the ball, it went in.

“Hah!” Robert cheered.

Point to Baratheons.

The game became less and less polite as it went to the entertainment of the spectators. Erren was... apparently completely unafraid of eating dirt. Making him quite the trip hazard. Renly could outspeed Imry on a straight sprint, but Imry was much better at jumping and more than once he used his head to pop the ball into the air, causing chaos as everybody abandoned clear strategy to all converge on the ball.

Delena was not likely to go charging into the fray but Selyse had no compunctions, aware that the Seaworths were not used to playing against women. If Imry and Erren were being closely guarded, she would often be free to slip by and charge down the field, almost dancing the ball along and making shots at the goal.

Dale Seaworth showed himself able, but Stannis was simply the better goalie.

Once it became clear that at least one of the Seaworths was always on hand to try to follow up on any blocked tries by Renly, he was never surprised. Once, Cousin Andrew was there, leaving his mid field position in addition to Renly and Robert laughed with amusement as Stannis thwarted four tries in quick succession, sprawling out on the grass, until he seemed finally completely put out and instead of batting the ball away the last time, curled up around it completely.

And in one instance, everybody was crowded to one side of the field, the Florents seemingly spontaneously deciding to try to harry Renly into a mistake as he tried to avoid stepping out of bounds, when the ball was kicked high out of the crowd, over their heads.

And Stannis was there, standing alone in the field, jogging determinedly after the ball.

“Can he do that? Wait-” Robert eyes widened.

“Go Stannis!” Lysa whooped, waving her banner wildly.

The Seaworth goalie was caught wrong footed as Stannis made an awkward kick.

It was, however, by beginner’s luck, full of power (Robert did know that Stannis had the kick of a mule from multiple scuffles) and though it curved dangerously, went into the goal.

“Uh-?”

“Whooo!” Selyse threw her hands up.

“GOAAAAL!” Imry bawled.

Robert laughed. Apparently, Stannis could do that; he surely would never do something explicitly against the rules.

Robert didn’t know what to expect that morning; perhaps a little bored but willing to clap for his brothers. But considering the antics of the Florents and Renly and Stannis’ mutual stubbornness, he laughed when finally Renly made one more goal just as the last grains of the hour glass ran down, enough to win the game.

He stood up and cheered as Renly bounded and leaped, laughing and proud, before getting swamped into congratulatory hugs by everybody on the field. Robert made his way to the field to hug Renly and slap Stannis’ back.

“Congratulations,” Robert said. “To you both. I had fun watching!”

Bread bundles and juice were ready for an after game meal and everybody spread out on blankets in the shade of the godswood. Renly was complimenting Stannis for his skills at blocking and for his spur of the moment decision to try scoring a goal all on his own. Robert laughed and agreed, saying that he hadn’t known that Stannis even practiced. Stannis admitted that he had been forced to sit through actual presentations on the game by Selyse, Imry, and Erren. And then he was subjected to practice sessions where they all one after another tried to get balls past him at the Foxhole. For when he agreed to be on their team, he had agreed to do the best of his ability.

Robert supposed at the end of the day that if asked, he would be game to join impromptu future games himself. Jon had forbidden him from all further participation in tourneys since being crowned. And hitting quintains was something he found boring long ago. So yes, something that expressly forbid the using of hands was just the thing. He figured this was something else to do with his brothers besides sparring. Though he did wonder if the Florents could be made to invent a game more his speed. He brought it up during the picnic.

“... One could have a game with the same goal and team set up, on horseback,” Selyse casually said.

“But the horses can’t be made to kick the ball,” Renly smiled.

“No, but if you had long handled mallets-”

Robert’s eyebrows raised. Stannis blinked. Renly clapped his hands, inspired.

“You still can’t hit anybody. But if you rode and swung,” Selyse made a swinging motion. “A game that tests horsemanship and hammer handling?”

“Yes. Yes!” Robert crowed.

Stannis pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

“We’ll have some test hammers made,” Alekyne chimed in. “What shall we call this?”

“Malletball? Because you hit the ball with mallets?”

“Hammerball!” Robert grinned.

Selyse grinned and raised her glass to him.

“Splendid idea, Robert!”

Robert laughed and swung his arms over his brothers’ shoulders.

“You two will have to test this out with me!”

“We will, Robert!” Renly grinned.

“... Very well,” Stannis finally said. “Improving horsemanship can’t hurt.”

King's Landing: Horsing Around

After dinner at the Foxhole, Erren met with Imry and Selyse. He had a chance to see baby Armand, who was still as bald as he was the day he was born, though he was now filled out to rounded health in his cheeks, a fine a baby as any, no longer an infant, and able to turn his head and actively observe the world.

“He doesn’t know how to smile yet,” Selyse said as she held Armand. “Not on purpose.”

“But he does smile?” Erren asked, as he knew nothing at all about babies.

He had no clear memories of Merrell at the proper age of newborn. He was four at the time.

“Oh, yes,” Selyse fondly patted Armand’s bottom. “He smiles after a properly large fart. He’s very relieved to get rid of his bloat.”

Erren and Imry grinned.

Armand remained ever amusing because of his non-expression while they made faces and stuck their tongues out at him. His resemblance to Stannis made it even more amusing because it was almost as if they were making faces at him by making faces at Armand. Of course Stannis would brook such disrespect in reality and of course he’d do so with a fearsome scowl. Armand bore the indignity of his uncles without such scowls and they pretended his lack of understanding was really instead a dignified forbearance. Occasionally Armand stuck his tongue out and it was worth laughing about. Imry was especially charmed when Armand would clasp his hands, as solemn as a septon, and gaze at them with that near-sighted blank baby stare.

“What a disapproving little lord,” Imry lowered his voice comically. “You are guilty of banditry and breaking the King’s Peace. Off with your fingers!”

Armand grunted. Imry and Erren cackled.

“Don’t you laugh,” Erren growled. “For that I shall have your entire left hand!”

Armand yawned and stuffed a fist to his mouth.

“My decision is final. And now that court is done, I shall have my nap, forthwith!” Imry continued with the growl.

After Armand was passed to his nurse for watching over they retreated into the chamber that Erren stayed in when away from Dragonstone. He was unmarried and so he did not have need of a suite of rooms like Selyse and Stannis.

“I believe the time has come that my prime objective cannot be hidden from all of Dragonstone. The noises will only be louder the more I make and test formulations of that black powder.”

Selyse nodded.

“Now,” Imry clapped his hands. “How shall we proceed? You mentioned two possible branches of utilization.”

Selyse pursed her lips, thinking.

“I think... We should concentrate on Rockets. It can be easily excused as inventing something amusing for the court. A gun is a gun. It is a weapon, pure intent for violence. The possibility for widespread destabilization cannot be underestimated with black powder used with guns. Peace is imperative.”

“And how would this second method, these rockets, be amusing instead of immediately seen as a weapon?” Erren tilted his head.

“They were called fireworks. The black powder provided the explosion of sound and heat. Mixing in other materials created color. I remember that fireworks were launched into the night sky and there were explosions of beautiful color; red and yellow, orange, green, blue. The sounds were deep booms, fizzing snaps, and hisses. They were exciting and awe inspiring.”

“And these other mixed in substances?”

“I assume powders of elements packed around and not within the black powder mixture. We already know that copper burns green or blue. Salt burns yellow. We know this. I would not spend so much time on finding all the possible best colors. Perhaps have one scholar dedicated to setting things on fire and figuring out the prettiest examples. You especially must concentrate on the weaponizing of the black powder.”

Erren took notes.

“And launching? Catapults or scorpions?”

“No. Rockets by themselves will serve. The principle is that you make a tube that is closed in one end. The other end is closed such that the powder does not fall out, but it must be weaker than the sides or the other end of the tube. A fuse of string is in the middle. Like a candle wick. This allows for safe setting on fire of the black powder. The fuse burns into one end of the tube and once the black powder ignites, as you know-”

Erren nodded.

“The power of the explosion has no room to move but out the fuse end of the tube. If the tube is aimed upward, the entire thing is pushed high into the air from the force of the explosion. The key thing is to balance the strength of the material of the tube, the width and length of the tube, the amount of black powder within the tube, in order to maximize distance and amount of damage caused by the explosion. Fire arrows. But much, much, much better.”

“Yes. I can just about see...”

“What would the tubes be made out of?” Imry asked.

“Small fireworks were encased in thicker paper. Card stock. I remember tubes as long as an arm were available for people to purchase easily for entertainments.”

“And for war?”

“Metal. Iron.”

“Black powder is strong enough to lift iron?” Imry raised his eyebrows.

“Black powder packed into the cardboard tubes and then packed together were used in mining operations,” Selyse smiled. “I know it can blast apart stone at sufficient quantities.”

“Very well. And the flight range of said rockets. They must be at least as good as scorpion bolts?”

“Better. At least three-quarters of a mile and that was achieved by primitive simple tubes without fletching for better accuracy. With fletching? And fired from the top of the Wall? The White Walkers won’t know what hit them. It’s a start.”

“Alright. It will be done.”

Erren then looked at Imry.

“And you? How goes it with you?”

“No maps north of the Wall, yet,” Imry shrugged. “Probably I shall find nothing useful unless I was in the North. And as for that, t’wouldn’t be difficult to get passage to White Harbor. But as we all know, there’s no good reason that any Northern lord should allow me anywhere near their solars or libraries. Let alone trying to offer purchase. Yet.”

“Well. There is Lord Stark, isn’t there?”

“Lord Paramounts are dangerous,” Imry made a half shrug. “But if needs must, I shall try to gain audience with him. I just wish that there were more that he owes us, to smooth the way.”

“Continuing to keep our silence about Snow is not enough?” Erren raised an eyebrow.

“They are Northmen, Erren. There’s trust and then there’s trust. Lord Eddard will always be uneasy about us, I suspect, until we save his life or one of his family and not a moment sooner,” Selyse quietly said. “And the whole point is to avoid having that House toppled. The Wall and the North must hold.”

“True,” Erren agreed. “But they are so overly cautious, all of them! It does not bode well for when the inevitable happens. And we know that it will go badly down south just from everybody’s disbelief!”

“In a few more moons’ time, there will be cause for at least one Northern House making their way to King’s Landing. I’ll see about having Uncle and Alekyne getting ready to extend hospitality. You must be here, of course.”

“Yes,” Erren nodded. “There will be so many more opportunities for us.”

They discussed some more on how to prevent widespread panic and rumor mongering from Dragonstone’s people regarding the existence of black powder and the future explosions. It was entirely possible for Erren to choose testing grounds on a far side of Dragonstone’s central mountains, though that took a three or four days worth of horseback distance from the castle proper and he was loath to be out of immediate contact.

Along the way Erren was glad to speak on his other less fraught experiments, which were furthering the use of the Bryans burner and his spectroscope. It was a wooden box with a prism mounted inside and two apertures where they had mounted fareye lenses and parts. His explorations on behalf of Maester Cressen, choosing interesting crevices to attack with a pickaxe, have yielded all sorts of rocks. Erren had never cared one way or another about rocks before given his especial mission by Selyse. Now, every chunk from an interestingly colored cliff or cave had loads of potential and he was beginning to think in colors, in weight, in textures, and even in taste. He had Maester Cressen to thank for that little tidbit of knowledge. Selyse had wrinkled her nose at this and warned him of poisonous minerals.

He showed Selyse and Imry a new powder with the spectroscope, something he found alongside cobalt, which excited Selyse as another tradeable commodity from Dragonstone itself, a mineral blue, something worth selling off to the most skilled of Westeros’ glassmakers. King Robert and Lord Jon Arryn saw the use of encouraging glassworks in King’s Landing, and attempting to have glassblowers gain skills enough to rival that of Myr. Decorative glass that did not come all the way across the sea was worth attempting and the steady flame achieved from gas used for the blacksmiths allowed to work for the Royal Steelworks proved inspiring for the Crownlands glassworkers.

The powder in question produced four spectral lines; purple, blues, and a lone green.

“It’s Element 25,” Erren excitedly clapped his hands. “I haven’t tried to figure out any use, but it’s new, new! Not as exciting as phosphorus, since it doesn’t glow, but surely you know something!”

Selyse drummed her fingers, thinking. She walked over to the large chart of the periodic table as they knew it so far that Erren kept pinned to the wall and stared at it.

“... Well. Send over quantities to the Royal Steelworks. See what they make of it. Stress specifically that when they try alloying, they must do so with rigorous control. Find out what happens with alloys at one to five percents and then have them go at five percent increments, from least to greatest.”

Erren nodded eagerly.

“And... it was... Manganese. Yes. It was called manganese. I expect it has something useful to do with magnets.”

“Yes! Royal Navy applications! More fundiiiiing!” Imry quietly sing songed.

Selyse smiled.

“I also expect that it because it has magnetic properties that it therefore has electromagnetic properties, which therefore means that it is significant to electrical works.”

Both of them stared at her with faint unease.

“Electricity? You mean lightning, isn’t it? I thought that Westeros isn’t ready. That we all aren’t ready.”

“I had not expected that you, dearest Erren, would discover such an important electromagnetic ingredient. There is only so far one can get with copper and zinc, sulfur and salts. With this, you could store power in your pocket and use it later.”

“It’s always so strange when you talk like that,” Imry softly said. “The power of lightning in your pocket.”

“Well. A little,” Selyse held up her thumb and forefinger. “Very little bit of it. Not enough to kill people. You must think of it was the next primal phenomenon that the people on the other side of the rabbit hole set out to understand and harness, like fire. A little bit warms and gives you light, it cooks food, it smelts metal, it is useful. But big enough and it is disaster. Devastating. Destruction. Electricity has that same place in the lives on the other side.”

“And you’ve set me on the path already exploring black powder uses and rockets! Oh, there aren’t enough hours in a day!” Erren moaned.

“There isn’t a hurry on this technology, is there,” Imry tapped his chin.

“No. Not at all,” Selyse replied.

“Then shall I take this on? I think whatever tinkering I do on this subject would be good, wouldn’t it?”

“To purely further knowledge in Westeros? Yes. Yes, definitely. As far as I’ve read, the Citadel merely knows of the properties of amber rubbed on wool, causing feathers rise in the air and to stick to them. And of course, if people rub themselves with wool, they can shock others.”

“Oh, is that electricity too? Woah,” Imry murmured.

“I’ll show you my notebooks on basic electromagnetic theory, shall I?” Selyse tilted her head.

“Yes. Definitely,” Imry grinned.

“Oooh, that’s exciting,” Erren nodded.

“Once you know enough such that you can make a proper battery- that was the name of the device that allows the generating of steady, small amounts of electrical power, we can then think on what can be done with it. There are all sorts of devices that can use a little power. But we must not get ahead of ourselves.”

“Is it entirely possible,” Imry said with a serious tone. “For me to have a device in my hand that can strike a person down with electricity?”

Visions of Imry armed with a taser or cattle prod, or both, flashed before Selyse’s eyes.

“...Yeeeeaaaah,” Selyse reluctantly said. “But, no. No. No, Imry, you will not. No, stop that smiling, you too, Erren! It’s not safe-”

“One hopes not.”

“And not possible to do clean kills. And that is what you must do above all else, Imry. Truly. You may very well figure out how to make such a thing, but they mostly stun or torture instead of kill surely. You cannot risk it.”

“But I desire this power so greatly now that I know that it is possible! You fill me with woe, Selyse. Woe.”

Selyse scoffed.

She did do as she promised, though, and they went into the most restricted area of the Foxhole’s workshop, digging into the notebooks that were locked inside chests that were locked behind multiple doors. She took out the notebooks dedicated to what she could remember on the subject of Electricity. She knew far less about the specifics of black powder rocketry, but that was well enough to be going with, Erren decided.

Imry decided to postpone his planned trip to Brightwater Keep to stay at King’s Landing as he was keen to begin immersing himself in the possibilities of Electricity. And that wasn’t even including how eager he was to work with Alekyne and make Hammerball a proper sport for the king.

Obviously they first tried a stuffed leather ball, the usual size for soccer to start. It took less than five swings for Robert to explode the thing across the field, to Renly’s laughter. It wasn’t likely that anybody else would have the sheer power to do such a thing, but they moved on, finally settling on carved wood. And then the test balls became smaller and smaller to make it more of a challenge because for all that Robert had a scattered sense of attention, he was duly focused on hitting things with a hammer.

Their experimenting at the Red Keep piqued the interest of the knights, who were encouraged to test out the different test hammers on their usual mounts while Robert observed. There were more misses than not, as the balls really were small, and more than one horse balked at the strange new thing in the field. Some were firmly convinced that the ball was some sort of terrible, dangerous monster and could not be convinced to obey. Everybody agreed that one never knew when it came to the mad ideas that came to some horses. Robert said that this game alone was worth it for eliminating horses unfit for the chaos of battle by their temperaments alone. He was open to said horses never being used in the Red Keep’s breeding ever again after their failure to heed multiple different riders. And that wasn’t including some horses that took exception to other horses running too close for their tastes in the field. The more hotblooded destrier stallions were especially stubborn, snapping at each other with their teeth or even kicking out with their hindlegs. Between the shying or plain rearing, it was a

little more dangerous than expected, but definitely not so fraught as for jousting. These behaviors had to be corrected, for clearly having horses that interfered with each other in a charge was disastrous in a battle.

Lord Jon Arryn took to the field and proved that his long experience at riding and for war was still good; his mount took direction readily, and demonstrated the training to make lateral movements, going sideways such that Jon could attempt to reach for a ball that was bouncing away from the horse's hooves. He even demonstrated that his mount could pivot on the hindlegs, changing direction with ease as the direction of play changed. It was enviable and though he was careful; not often pushing his mount to gallop, he was able to control the ball more often than not.

His performance garnered much applause and Robert admitted that he had forgotten how the Vale knights were trained to effectively maneuver on mountainous battlefields.

Everybody saw the sense in Lord Jon sending for Arryn horse trainers and to begin a new training schedule with the Red Keep's stables, to properly prepare and refine the horses up to standard.

Oberyn's little sand steeds were also fine choices for the new game, for they were more agile than any of the other horses available, though not so finely trained as Jon's horses. The famed endurance of such horses were put on show, for they surely did not become winded as the matches went on. He was entirely gratified to learn this new game, which would increase the value of sand steeds outside of Dorne for the purposes of trade and breeding should it become popular. And he had no doubt given what he could see of Robert's enthusiasm that this Hammerball would become the new fashion amongst knights and men-at-arms that could afford trained horses.

The game even forced the players to have multiple horses; Robert preferred a longer game in general, but with pauses into periods to change his mounts to prevent them from becoming winded. The exercise was good for the horses in the stables, who needed exercise already and were often bored with being made to run circles in a training paddock. So, besides their own personal steeds, the Red Keep knights and other knights were able to make use of different mounts, which was to the benefit of everybody involved.

Even Selyse and Delena tried out and they found the exercise fun as well, putting their fine palfreys through their paces. Palfreys had in general calm temperaments and were bred to be suitable for ladies; biddable. They looked comically undersized (similar to Oberyn's sand steeds) compared to the destriers and coursers of knights and lords, but their calmness was an asset as they went after the ball. The only thing that prevented Selyse or Delena from successfully making goals was usually that they lacked any training of the battlefield lateral movements or pivots favored by Lord Jon.

Selyse was the one to introduce a new dimension to the game by swinging her hammer down to hit the ball backwards instead of trying to turn her horse around to gain possession for her team. This new variant caused the play to stop and then a rousing argument on whether or not it ought to be allowed. Finally, Robert was applied to as King. He was all in favor, as it made the game trickier, so that was that.

Selyse dispassionately made an effort to inform Queen Cersei of this new development. Perhaps the new amusement would be to her taste? Unfortunately, simply because it was Selyse to make the case, she sniffed and refused in a pique, to say nothing of Robert's enthusiasm, which caused an even worse impression. It was then that Selyse approached Ser Jaime over the matter.

Ser Jaime found Lady Selyse something of a peculiar marginal figure at court. She was a tall shadow that stood beside her dour husband, expressionless as a statue. On the other hand, she danced with enviable grace, could make the King laugh with a quip in the Reacher manner, and was a friend to Lady Lysa Arryn, who flitted about her like... Well. Some sort of enthusiastic squirrel. Lady Lysa giggled and tittered, her bangles tinkling on her wrists as she imitated the hand gestures of the Reacher ladies in speech. She was not so tall that the swinging, gliding gait exhibited by the Florent women looked natural to her, but she had a lightness to her movements now, a buoyancy that spoke of happiness that was missing before.

For some mysterious reason, she managed to make Prince Oberyn enamored of her. Her! When his sweet sister was the light of court! Unaccountable.

Unless this was just Dornish mischief making and he was really only making eyes to rouse Lord Stannis into ill-thought temper. Jaime could find no reason why Oberyn would try that famous Baratheon fury. He was certainly in no fear of Stannis beating him in a duel with swords; barring Ser Barristan he was the best. But from sparring with the King it was clear that all it took was underestimating the burst of speed and power that came from sheer anger and Baratheons could and would smear you across the landscape like so much horseshit on a well traveled road.

Ser Jaime didn't know what to think when Lady Selyse approached him (apparently she found out the shift scheduling of the White Cloaks. How odd) and frankly entreated him to encourage his sister into taking up Hammerball. Even said something about how the Queen would benefit from an amusement that he himself as a knight could enjoy. Hmm. Jaime would be suspicious, only it was impossible for anybody to know about... them. They were careful. And nobody outside of Casterly Rock knew of Cersei's early forays into learning swordplay and squiring by switching their clothing so long ago in their childhoods.

He saw no harm in it. Riding with purpose was better than riding about aimlessly in circles in a paddock. And Cersei wouldn't even go with Robert on his occasional hunts. Why not?

He brought the subject up to her and she huffed with exasperation. However, he saw that she wanted to be convinced and so he did with kisses and touches, claiming that he missed having another reason to associate her in public. That was that.

It was well, Jaime thought. He enjoyed the new game, as it made him actively recall the battlefield horsemanship maneuvers in a more active way than going through drills in a training paddock and he was looking forward to winning against Ser Barristan at the game fairly. He would never pass up more opportunities to associate with Ser Barristan. Even going up against King Robert was worth it; the King simply had much more experience at swinging hammers. Jaime was finding the unfamiliar movement something to get used to and he was determined to master it; he was a natural at the sword, why shouldn't he? So, it stood to

reason that Cersei would enjoy it as well. Surely she hadn't grown to be so boring that she would refuse the exercise, learning how to ride the way knights did? It would be fun!

Harlaw Island: Catching that Wave

Lord Rodrik Harlaw and his sister Lady Gwynesse tried to soothe their sister Lady Alannys. They formed an embrace with Alannys in the middle, rocking poor Lanny as she hiccuped and keened. It seemed like the better part of an hour and she was not getting better.

“No, no, don’t let them take my children away! No, don’t- they’ll kill them- Don’t!”

Rodrik tired of his useless efforts and left Gwynesse to it. He left Lanny’s chamber to see his niece and nephew. They were waiting for him in his solar. He sat at his desk and picked up the latest raven message.

“The first ship of the IITC complete. Crew selection complete. Aeron Greyjoy for first mate. Lord Rodrik Harlaw, Yara Greyjoy, and Theon Greyjoy invited to the Wendwater Royal Shipyard to attend the launching ceremony. Witness the beginning of a new rise in Iron Islander fortunes and legacy. Looking forward to seeing you again. Sincerely, Alekyne Florent.”

He put it down.

“Your mother is sure that this is a ruse. An excuse to have you two in greenlander hands and executed. She is afraid. Are you?”

“Theon might be. I’m not,” Yara immediately replied.

“I’m not scared!” Theon cried out. “And I’ve done nothing wrong! Not like Father. Besides. Uncle Aeron’s been made first mate! They didn’t have to do that when they could’ve just kept him rotting in Casterly Rock’s dungeons.”

“You also trust Alekyne Florent, Nuncle,” Yara added. “Don’t you?”

Rodrik had to admit to himself that he did. The way the Florents admired his Book Tower, the way they had worked for the betterment of the Iron Islands; they did not have to care. And they did. He was very inclined to give them the benefit of doubt that he would not extend to some other Iron Islands lords.

There was also the fact that their generosity was just... breathtaking, really. Once they found out that he desired a Myrish lense for reading, they sent over a large one with a handle that he could keep in his Book Tower and a smaller one he could wear on a chain; he had to have new pockets for his new personal lense sewn on all his doublets. Furthermore, Alekyne told him that these lenses were Westeros-made! Amazing!

Over the moons immediately after the Rebellion the Florents had sent over the seashell carvers as promised. They also sent over midwives and healers, stocks of dried and preserved medicinal herbs, marvelous cotton and wool cloth and spools of cotton thread for fishing nets or sewing, soaps, vinegar, and dried herbs that made his meals so much more palatable. The trade voyages he ordered his own captains to undertake were such that he could not keep his

own stores of the Essosi spices they brought back; it all had to be sold on. The self-same healers and midwives went to work establishing proper healer's gardens. To his delight, they were also growing bay laurel, dill, chives, parsley, onions, and garlic, to keep his kitchens well-stocked.

Alekyne even sent over some recipes that Erren and the cooks of Dragonstone had worked out experimenting with oysters, mussels, and clams. Chowder. Fritters. Drunken mussels. Grilled. Steamed. Baked. The versatility of the shelled creatures was astounding. And even better, the widows on the islands could harvest these creatures as easily as waiting for the tides to change. And that was before the Florents encouraged the harvesting of crabs, shrimps, and lobsters. Rodrik was very skeptical indeed of the value of eating sea bugs. But he could not deny that broiled lobster tails required only salt for flavor to be perfectly tasty.

The other Lords were very resistant indeed, but after he held a feast on Harlaw to ostensibly celebrate Theon's nameday as heir and served these dishes highlighting the lesser known bounty of the sea, more filling and flavorful than any other feast before, they were won over. There was also the entertaining novelty of having to crack open the shells of the sea bugs to get to the meats using wooden mallets for the purpose. For those who wanted heartier meats, the Florents even sent over a flock of chickens for establishment at the Ten Towers. It had never occurred to Rodrik that the birds could be fed on fish guts and other offal or that they should eat ground up seashells in order to make stronger eggshells for their own eggs. Alekyne encouraged him to convince the Iron Islands lords to begin purchasing and bringing over more birds; surely with so many older thralls of Greenlander ancestry the knowledge of chicken keeping would be easily revived.

It was made all the better by the books! He knew that Reacher House was wealthy but crates of books, for no price at all, was almost beyond belief! He personally possessed a copy of The Westerosi Practical Navigator as well as a sextant. He traced the names of Rhea and Selyse Florent on the title page and thought it most curious that two landlubbing girls would be the source of true dominion over the seas.

He had it from Alekyne's letters that the Florents were unaccountably blessed in one generation with creative and quick minds. That the brightest of these minds were of the women of the family Alekyne proudly pointed out as a legacy of the Florent founding mother, Florys the Fox. Alekyne even supposed that the decline of the Florent fortunes over the centuries must have come from the Andal tendency to ignore daughters in favor of sons; perhaps if they followed Rhyonish ways the Florents would be quite a force to be reckoned with. This was something to consider, Rodrik thought.

Perhaps Yara should be taught navigation. And who knows, perhaps she had the stomach for violence as a Greyjoy to reach for a captainship. He was stymied about a woman's long presence at sea given the inevitable difficulties of moonbleeding, but Gwynesse changed his mind because of yet another Florent import; something called the cotton tampon. She had raved about it and was most wroth when she found out that the Florents had been quietly producing and selling the invention ever since Selyse Florent began her inventions with the cotton gin; over five years ago. She could have been using these particular inventions years ago! She laid into him with all her lung power when she found out.

“Men! Never thinking of womenfolk! Well! I’m ordering you to order your men to always buy up proper crates of them each time you anchor at port! ALWAYS, Roddy!”

Rodrik was baffled, until Yara took him aside and told him that it was so; those cotton cunt plugs were apparently life changing. She jested that Ironborn women were more likely to bed a man who could present her with a score of such things instead of a golden bauble. Already, the healers and midwives were making rounds and receiving requests. They were cheap enough; at a penny for two dozen, he saw the sense of it. He wrote to Alekyne, who passed it on to Selyse; she replied that they were doing brisk trade through traveling healers and midwives in the Reach, Crownlands, Stormlands, the Vale, and Westerlands. They were making inroads into the Riverlands. The larger towns had sales from general stores and door to door peddlers were finding that they could get regular purchases day to day of the items. They were packaged discreetly in drawstring cotton bags, stamped on front with the image of a respectable woman wearing a whimple sitting in front of a crescent moon.

The Faith had some qualms over perhaps the unsuitability of such things for virgin maids to use, but various highly respected midwives gathered with septas and came to a consensus on the subject and they informed the High Septon that no little cotton plug could unmake a maid; not when saddles for riding were not considered so and everybody knew that women who rode often and hard risked having no maidenheads at all on their wedding nights from the exercise. Further arguments were made but as the Florents had been selling the products for years before the High Septon was made aware of its existence, it was too late to convince women to go back to rags or ruining their clothes.

As it was, the book detailing how to turn human and animal dung into a gas to fuel flames suitable for cooking or metalwork was very exciting. He purchased the equipment needed and hired on workers from Brightwater Keep trained in the construction and maintenance of biogas digesters. He would have the first on Harlaw and then they would see. Not having to use precious wood for cooking; how wonderful!

“I do,” Rodrik finally said. “Alekyne Florent did not have to maintain correspondence as he has. I surely know more from him on the progress of the new trading ship than from official messages from the Crown.”

“Then we should decide who will go,” Yara said very reasonably.

“I must go, as Regent,” Rodrik nods to himself. “And have some Goodbrothers and Botleys with me. I suppose I ought to invite a House of each of the islands, see if we can make a proper showing at King’s Landing.”

He sighs to himself.

“The bigger the party, the slower the travel and they’ll not want to travel overland.”

“I want to go, to see the ship,” Yara announced. “And there ought to be a Greyjoy there.”

“Then I want to go,” Theon said. “I’m the heir. You should stay.”

Yara responded by shoving Theon, who fell hard, and responded by popping back up and kicking at her; he couldn't strike her properly with his hands because as she was taller than him, she needed only to stick her hand on his forehead and keep her arm stiff to have him unable to reach her.

"Children," Rodrik snapped.

They resumed standing at more or less attention. Theon stuck his tongue out at Yara.

"I think it is right that you two ought to go, but if you should behave like this in front of the greenlanders..."

"I'll be good!" Theon rose up and bobbed on the balls of his feet eagerly.

Yara snorted.

"But your mother..." Rodrik shook his head.

"Can't she come? So she doesn't cry?" Theon suggested. "Or bother Aunt Gwynesse?"

Now that was an idea.

"Only if she thinks she can bear the scrutiny of the court," Rodrik decided.

"Must we go to King's Landing?" Yara wrinkled her nose. "I just wanted to go to the Royal Shipyard for the launch, not fuss with those greenlanders."

Theon wrinkled his nose also and Rodrik chuckled.

"I would not go to court myself if I had a choice. But the greenlanders want assurance that we will not be further trouble. And they did pay for most of the ship through the shares of the Trading Company. King Robert is a friendly, jolly sort of man. When he isn't bent on war. I think it would not be a hardship, as..."

Rodrik picked up a book from his desk.

"Alekyne sent over a book on the latest etiquette and court manners. You represent House Greyjoy. You will not shame your House, or me, with childish behavior and you will practice at greenlander courtesies."

Both Yara and Theon's mouths turned down comically.

"Now, now," Rodrik grinned. "I'll be reading it over and your Aunt Gwynese will be in charge of the preparations. We'll even have Cousin Harras over so that he can give us advice. He's been taught courtesies enough to become knighted, so it cannot be so bad. We have allies at court, after all. The Florents and the Dragonstone Baratheons are well disposed to us."

"Yes, Nuncle Rodrik," Yara reluctantly said. And made a very bad curtsy as an afterthought. "There."

Rodrik put a hand to his mouth to prevent her from seeing him smiling at her poor attempt; it would not do to rouse her temper. He raised his eyebrows expectantly at Theon.

“Yes, Nuncle,” Theon tipped forward more than properly bowed.

Rodrik dismissed them and began writing out raven messages for the most prominent Iron Islands Houses to ready representatives for the upcoming launching ceremony. He ought to think on having a priest of the Drowned God along also; it would not do to have that ship named and launched without a proper ceremony.

It would not be politic to make landing at Lannisport; he was no fool. Their flotilla would go to Seaguard and they could take barges down the Green Fork as far as possible until they needed to go on the King’s Road. Alekyne wrote that the King’s Road was being improved and to expect a proper Royal reception at King’s Landing; a feast. They would stay on as royal guests and then they would go to the Royal Shipyard.

He went to tell Gwynesse about the idea that Lanny should accompany her children to the ship launch and be presented at court. Gwynesse pursed her lips.

“She might take well to it,” she said slowly. “Or she’ll start wailing about the greenlanders wanting to kill her, like as not. Still. If it eases her heart to keep her remaining children close, then it’s as good as it could be.”

Lanny blinked and opened and closed her mouth before grasping Rodrik’s arm with both hands after he informed her of the plan.

“I’ll go with them? To the greenlands?”

“If you like. Would you, dear Lanny?”

Her eyes watered and she smiled.

“Yes.”

She smoothed her hands over her skirts.

“...Oh. I’ll- We need court gowns, Theon needs a new doublet-”

Rodrik quickly retreated from her and Gwynesse’s womanfolk talk over feast and court apparel. They pored over the etiquette book and the drawings of court dresses that Delena Florent included in a neat packet, with little diagrams that laid out the dressmaking patterns and new style of arranging hair. Yara and Theon had the displeasure of having to stand still for clothing fittings. Lanny was still in mourning (Gwynesse would unsympathetically scoff over it to Rodrik out of hearing; she certainly had nothing good to say about Balon Greyjoy and how he sapped Lanny’s joy and strength with hard pregnancies and harsh words over the years). So her court gown would be in black entire. She would wear the best fur trimmed cloak that the Harlaws had, with a silver scythe clasp. Her eyes brightened at the latest and best yield from the seashell cameo carvers; an oval as large as her palm with a kraken would serve as a belt buckle. Another kraken cameo would serve as a pendant, hanging from a short

yet thick multi-strand necklace of mixed pearls, mother of pearl beads, and silver links. Gwynesse and the handmaids worked out how to give her the pompadour lift of the Reacher ladies but coiled Lanny's customary single long braid at her crown instead of trying for the ambitious tousled bun, secured in place with pretty iridescent mother of pearl hair combs.

Yara had sneered at it all, but Gwynesse set a yellow and black striped fabric for her gown on diagonal so that they formed an eye catching, lively chevron pattern and draped and ruched over Yara's still growing bust. Over Yara's waist they put on a wide, tooled leather belt that showed a pair of kraken with trailing arms on either side of a kraken buckle. She received two kraken cameos to pin to the shoulders of her dress. Polished and round-cut pieces of mother of pearl formed another necklace and paired bracelets, more subtle in shine but no less pleasing for their iridescence. She especially did not wish to do the pompadour, seeing it as greenlander fiddle faddle, but allowed for her hair to be divided into two long braids and the braids coiled over the crown of her head and pinned in place with hairpins decorated with more of those round-cut mother of pearl pieces.

Theon would get an all black suit of court clothes made out of that practical broadcloth the Florents sent over, with mother of pearl buttons. His jacket's entire back had the Greyjoy kraken, a large and detailed piece of embroidery that was saved and repurposed from a cloak owned by one of his older brothers. They cut the cloak down so that it would serve as the back of the jacket. He would wear a belt with a passed down kraken belt buckle and use a passed down kraken brooch to fasten his short cloak. Gwynesse and Lanny thought that as he was still growing it would not do to have his clothing be fancier than that.

When they made landing at Seaguard, Ser Imry Florent was there to meet them with horses, attendants, men-at-arms for escort, and a wheelhouse suitable for Lanny, Yara, and Theon. Lanny would later confess to Rodrik that the wheelhouse was the finest she had ever been in; the thing had glass windows! Such extravagance just for her! Rodrik was pleased by the respect and delicacy demonstrated by the Florents in recognizing that his sister was a widow of a Great House. The Florents demonstrated more of their cleverness by adding something called a leaf spring to the axles, causing the wheels to ride more smoothly over the road. The Ironborn besides Rodrik were of course suspicious and standoffish with Imry at first, until they found that he could curse, fight, and drink as well as any of them if there was cause for it. He ingratiated himself among them, asking for sea stories, trading story for story, song for song. They scoffed at his love songs, but he grinned and arrogantly tilted his head.

"Ah, but I have all I need in this world. With proper songs I can serenade women willing into my arms and if she has a man, I can throw a knife and he's no problem of mine anymore!" he boasted cheekily.

Ironborn do appreciate a good boast. They challenged him to show them his skill at knife throwing if he was so good and he readily showed them. He turned out to be as fine a knife-thrower as any they have met. He in turn was up to the challenge of singing songs having nothing to do with love, such as "Mac the Knife".

He got himself into a few confrontations when the more untrusting thought he was being untoward towards Lady Alannys and Lady Yara. Rodrik was not concerned; he knew enough from his forays into greenlander harbors on his own trading voyages to know that Ser Imry

was merely being an attentive listener and polite. That he smiled too much was just a fact that the Florents, from what he remembered of them as a group, were ones to smirk and grin at the least cause. If anybody bothered to ask Rodrik, it was far more likely that Imry would tempt away one or another of the handmaids. He could see it already; that when Imry sang gaily about love and strutted around the campfire, that the maids were looking at him with flushed cheeks, unable to resist smiling back when he smiled at them.

It did help, Rodrik thought to himself, that Ser Imry had all his teeth, washed his face, combed his hair, and had a very nicely trimmed moustache. Very handsome he was not, and those famed ears could not be ignored, but he was as gallant an example of Reach knight as any in his fine traveling clothes and good boots. It made even more sense after learning that his mother was a Varner; a son of a cunning fox and bold weasel! Why he was a lean, dangerous sort of man, a killer, Rodrik's instincts whispered. Why wouldn't hard Iron Islands women be curious about him, ready to be charmed by the likes of him?

Imry asked Lanny questions about the wellbeing of the smallfolk (as they were all to cease being thralls) and took notes in his notebook. With Rodrik he also asked questions regarding the management of his holdings. From the first conversation Rodrik was moved to have Yara and Theon to sit in, as Imry was an agile conversationalist and not at all like a typical greenlander non-heir son who went about spending his House's money and doing nothing useful. As far as Rodrik could figure, Imry was a self-directed scout for the Florents, traveling between the keeps of his kin from the Reach to King's Landing to the Vale and back. What he was scouting for was unclear and none of Rodrik's business, really.

Rodrik himself had never been inland for so long before; the same for everybody else in the entourage. So it was very fortunate indeed that the Florents sent along somebody as well-traveled as Imry to escort them and to speak for them at inns along the way. Of course the Riverlanders were not willing to pay host to Ironborn; it was only to be expected. So they were not feasted at keeps or castles along the way. At most Imry could secure rooms for Lanny, Yara and Theon. They would camp around the inn itself and Imry would sing songs enough to the innkeepers to finagle better joints of beef for them or more ale. The Ironborn scoffed at his behavior; they would think nothing of simply beating stubborn smallfolk innkeepers into submission and taking all of their food stores. Imry shrugged and slyly pointed out that getting things for the cost of a few songs was seduction at its best.

"Besides. If one has to resort to thievery, it's better to con or sneak thief it. That way, they can't be sure on who stole anything. Gives you more time to get away."

Rodrik raised his eyebrows; greenlanders had such tedious standards of honor and conduct and here was a knight bandying about the merits of larceny with casual aplomb. Perhaps he was merely being glib.

"Rather dishonorable, though?" Rodrik quietly commented. "Craven, even."

"Indeed," Imry nodded. "But if one must steal, then better to not add obvious violence to it. Makes things so messy."

Rodrik shook his head. He did not hold with the Old Way Iron Price, but at least, one was honest about visiting violence to wrest what you wanted. A proper reaving. None of this

underhanded, Coddish way of thinking.

“Now why would a knight steal?”

“A proper knight? Probably not got a call for it,” Imry shrugged. “But I’m not just any knight. I’m a Florent.”

Was there something he didn’t know about that Reacher House?

“What does that mean, you being a Florent? Known for thieving, then?”

“No. We’re not known for that. Famous thieves are caught and dead thieves, after all,” Imry smirked. “I mean...”

He made an obviously shifty look at Yara and Theon who were overhearing. Yara pursed her lips, a little amused, and Theon looked eager.

“Florents seek to solve our problems. Anything is Permitted. And if theft is the best way... then it is done. It is only logical, after all.”

“Hmm,” Rodrik said.

“How can anything be permitted if Father got executed for what he did?” Theon wrinkled his brow.

“Ah, but just because you can do anything, doesn’t mean that you should. After all, everybody else is also permitted to respond as they will. Consequences, consequences. Play stupid games, win stupid prizes!” Imry gestured dramatically with his hands.

Theon frowned in thought, but finally nodded.

“We would much rather talk our way into getting what we want,” Imry grinned at him. “You know how it goes.”

“Yes, greenlanders are famous for wanting to prattle on,” Rodrik jested back.

“Boring,” Yara declared, challenging Imry.

“Some are unskilled speakers,” Imry agreed. “But get an exciting speaker in the room and well- Seduction happens.”

Alekyne, Rodrik thought. He means his cousin Alekyne and the Iron Islands Trading Company.

Yara snorted rudely, which only made Imry smile.

“Greenlander prattle. I wouldn’t be gulled by some man mouthing words at me. If any man wanted to impress me, he best be strong and good with an axe, fearless and dreadful!”

“Well, of course,” Imry agreed. “You’re a Greyjoy.”

His easy agreement to her took some of the wind from her sails, but Yara pressed on with her argument.

“What about you? What’s the sort of lady you like? The kind that giggle, sigh, and swoon? Pretty, who can dance and embroider and such things?”

“I do enjoy a good dance. But a man who chases only after a pretty face is a fool. A woman who’d not let any merchant swindle her, who can think her way through a problem and solve them, who values the truth but knows when to lie, who can see the difficult decisions that need to be made and then have the strength to make them, who is the true steel instead of the glitter that is not gold, that would strike me as worth getting married for.”

“Oh,” Yara said, a little overwhelmed. He sounded so sensible. “And are there many women like that?”

“No. Yet my sister is like that,” Imry said proudly. “And my cousins! Of course, I’m no Targaryen, so... It’s a wandering knight’s life for me.”

Yara burst out with a laugh at Imry’s easy, uncouth way of referencing the incestual practices of the old ruling family.

Lanny was giving Rodrik significant looks. Rodrik sighed to himself. It wasn’t too early to consider Yara’s marital prospects, but he had hoped that the younger men among the Goodbrothers or even a Harlaw cousin would interest her on this trip. For all that Yara scoffed and argued, the fact that she went out of her way to attempt to rile Imry, her posturing and her newfound docility when it came to washing her face and the combing and arranging of her hair by the handmaids was a sign. As far as he could tell, Imry had no intentions with Yara. Why would he? A son of a third son of a banner House doesn’t seek out a Great House’s daughter, no matter that Balon Greyjoy was a fool and the Florents had risen by marrying into the royal family. He was an unlanded knight, after all, with surely nothing to his name but his sword, horses, and armor. (And if he were unlucky in tourneys, not even that!) And if Rodrik should offer Yara to the Florents, the outrage from the Iron Islands Houses would make a hurricane look like a breeze.

Rodrik hoped that Lanny would take Yara in hand and prevent her from escalating her flirtations. Arguments were one thing, but should Yara take to slapping at Imry’s shoulders, grasping at his biceps, and shoving him just so that she could feel out the muscles of his torso, the other men would surely take serious offense. Drowned God knew what he could do if anybody caught her trying at those Ironborn flirtations on a greenlander.

They rode down the King’s Road and Imry bored the rest of the Ironborn by explaining the engineering improvements to the road itself. Rodrik was interested and he was further intrigued by how Imry was comfortable with speaking with wool merchants who passed on the road. He listened as Imry would while away time inquiring about sheep, of all things, and the conditions of the road, and gossip. It would be a long time yet for the King’s workers to get to Moat Cailin, they all said. Getting a good road through the swamps of the Neck would be most difficult. Imry would write down the information in his notebook. Rodrik could see how it was so; the road was wide enough for four wheelhouses to drive abreast, edged with large squared off blocks of stone and the surface of the road filled with firmly tamped down

gravel between broad courses of stone or brick and gently domed at the middle to shed rain, with shallow ditches on either side to catch and redirect rainwater.

Imry knew things. Rodrik tested him, asking about this or that as they passed; the name of a shrub or tree, the habits of a passing bird, the history of the House whose lord's lands they were passing through. He knew his woodcraft and he knew his courtesies. He knew his history, he knew his business with his weapons. Why did he have to be a greenlander son of a third son, Rodrik ruefully thought to himself; what a match he could be for Yara! If he knew how to sail, he'd be near perfect as can be.

Rodrik curiously asked about the history of the Florents. It was one thing to read what the maesters thought important about a House, it was another thing as to what members of said House thought was important. Imry gave an account of Florys the Fox and how his House had as good a claim as any other for the Lord Paramountcy of the Reach, unlike those Tyrells.

"Wait. Wait. Your House comes from a three husband cuckolding woman?" one of the Goodbrother triplets cried out in amazement.

"Yes," Imry replied proudly.

The Goodbrother triplets exchanged glances.

"How is that great? You Florents are the Coddys of the Reach, are you?"

This brought guffaws from the overhearing Ironborn.

"If anything, we're just as good as a Goodbrother," Imry lifted his chin. "And as for how great it is, Florys must have been very clever indeed, because she birthed three sons from each of the men and she managed to not get killed for what she did. Getting away with what she dared; how isn't that admirable? Any old sailor can have a woman at every port, but for a lady to have three husbands on land? That's actual skill."

"Still, a cuckolding woman's not anything but a whore."

"Got away with it," Imry repeated stoutly. "Winning and grinning!"

"Who were the poor sod husbands, though?"

Imry shrugged.

"Nobody knows anymore. Not worth mentioning except that she conned them well."

"T'wouldn't be hard to con three idiots," yet another of the Goodbrother triplets muttered. "Or three blind men."

"Blind and deaf," the third added.

"Now where's the fun in that? Easy marks are not worth the trouble." Imry cocked his head. "She was a proper princess, daughter of King Garth Greenhand. They'd be proper lordly husbands fit for a princess. What do those three men matter anyway?"

At this all the Ironborn looked at him as if he was mad.

“Fathers matter,” a Blacktyde sputtered. “A House is built on sons! Rock sons and Salt sons!”

“Not my House,” Imry patiently said, as if they were the mad ones. “Besides, unlike fathers, mothers will always be sure that her children are her own.”

“Almost sounds like you wouldn’t mind being a cuckold,” a Goodbrother triplet sneered.

They all laughed and the Goodbrother’s readied themselves for Imry to strike at any of them for the insult, grinning challengingly.

“If the mother were clever enough to fool me,” Imry’s tone remained confident. “It doesn’t matter that I’m not the father true. The mother’s proved herself a Florent and her children are therefore Florents too. Florents get away with things if we can. Can’t say that and not expect those with daring to try the same on us.”

They were forced to consider the odds of any of the women they knew succeeding at fooling a canny character as this Ser Imry Florent. Any of the weeping salt wives, any of the tired and toiling rock wives, any of their mothers, aunts, cousins, daughters, or nieces. The odds were very low indeed. They said nothing; his sharp grin was enough. It was clear that should any woman be fool enough to try, she’d find her throat slit by one of his knives, as clear as anything. (Never mind that Ser Imry Florent would do no such thing, as he was no Ironborn) None have managed to best him at Two Truths and a Lie, after weeks of traveling with him, after all.

“Though, we Florent men do have an unfair advantage. Not just anybody has ears as big as these,” Imry tugged on an earlobe. “Makes passing off bastards as trueborn so very difficult.”

They laughed at this too true jest and their attention moved on. Rodrik waited until there were none paying attention before asking Imry if he meant it, or if this was yet another demonstration of his ability to lie and lie convincingly.

“My sister Selyse taught us to think, truly think, on what it means for us Florents to honor Florys the Fox,” Imry replied. “Unlike House Ball or House Peake, who quietly show by the number three in their sigils that they come from one of the three husbands and ignore the woman who fooled them all.

Those other Houses chose, despite forgetting the very names of their forefather, to ignore Florys. My House does not. She WAS a daring bigamist. She WAS also a daughter of Garth Greenhand. She pulled off a spectacular con and formed three Houses by herself. It’s outrageously insane. So much so, that truly, if anybody clever enough does marry into our House and manages to pass off bastards as trueborn, if their cleverness and daring breeds true, House Florent remains House Florent. If any Florent man is so foolish that he follows after the nameless husband of Florys instead of Florys, better he not have any trueborn children to pass on that dullness.”

Considering this, Rodrik nodded, still not quite understanding how such a House could be respectable in the Reach. As foreign as greenlander ways were to Ironborn, surely the

Florents were foreign to the other Reachers if they held to such thoughts. Perhaps they were in truth like the Coddys. But if that was so, it would be impossible for one of their women to be married into the royal family. For their House to hold such influence on the King. Perhaps this was just another Florent secret, freely given to Ironborn because who would believe them on the matter?

He watched Ser Imry ride along, speaking with Theon, giving him advice on being a lord.

Well. Perhaps they were just waiting for decades, nursing a grudge against the Tyrells, yet unwilling to bring more attention to themselves than all the other Reacher Houses that bragged of Garth Greenhand blood in their veins. Unable to do much until that oaf Mace Tyrell gambled wrongly during the Rebellion and then the Florents rose up and seized the chance to drag them and the rest of the competing Houses down like a riptide. He could respect that.

He idly wondered if they would overextend and leave themselves open like the Reynes and Tarbecks. Yet Mace was no Tywin. You could not expect proper brutality from the Roses. And for as ambitious as the Florents seemed, they were no fools, not at all. They obviously, loudly, avoided owing anything to the Tyrells, while conspicuously refraining from saying anything besides the old, tiresome whine about the Tyrells being upjumped stewards for appearances sake. There was something to be said about keeping your head down and acting the harmless whiner. Not gainsaying an unreasonable liege lord, yet able to elude stupid orders. Would that he could get away with what the Florents did by withholding their men-at-arms during the Rebellion; he would still have his sons. Perhaps this befriending of the Iron Islands is just one more move against the Tyrells; Alekyne had written that Mace and most of the other Reacher lords would have none of their money spent to better the Iron Islands, leaving shares of the Company on the table for themselves and other more pragmatic Houses. As he had only barely the wherewithal to speculate on politics and intrigue as practiced by greenlanders, he would let it all pass.

What matters is that House Harlaw would prosper from his personal rapport with House Florent. The winds were changing, the tides were rising and he was going to catch that wave and see how far it would take him and his House.

Highgarden: Worrisomely Clear Eyed

Lady Olenna Tyrell was not vexed. She certainly was not. Knowing her varying shades of ill temper, she could categorically say she was simply annoyed. Which was a shade more emotion than her general disapproval and contempt in regards to her son. Thankfully Maester Lomys knew what was what, and kept her apprised of raven messages instead of merely dropping off his summaries in Mace's solar, where it would disappear into a ridiculous disorganized pile in a basket and then summarily emptied into the hearth fire at the end of a sevenday. He claimed it was to prevent spies from getting the messages. She knew it was because he was lazy and didn't want to bother sending for Maester Lomys. Oaf!

Obviously once she found out Mace's habits she had Maester Lomys hire scribes to have the messages transcribed a second time prior to giving over to Mace so that she could read them at her leisure. The last batch contained a Royal announcement regarding the business with the Ironborn. Some sort of scheme involving sharing of costs of building out trade ships. She had heard of such arrangements among groups of Braavosi merchants. Now she had no notion of why any Westerosi noble should follow in the practices of foreigners, but it was a fact that Braavos were a force to be reckoned with when it came to maritime concerns and she wouldn't be a Redwyne, a mere woman or not, if she was not aware of the power that came from controlling sea trade.

At the beginning, she wrote to her nephew Paxter Redwyne about his thoughts on the business. The prideful man wrote back that he would put no money of his towards bettering the fortunes of Ironmen cunts and that he was glad that Lord Lannister would be the one to keep garrisons of men-at-arms on the Iron Islands so that he and other coastal Reacher lords could have peace without having to lend any effort. He said he thought that of course Lord Lannister was canny enough to perhaps attempt defraying his costs of dealing with the backwards pirates by having others buying in this so called investment scheme. Casterly Rock could do what was needed all on their own, with their own treasuries, of course. Nobody doubted it was so. But Tywin was a cannier man about gold than his fool of a father. He wasn't just going to spend and spend when others could be induced to spend too. No doubt some Ironmen Houses went behind the late Lord Greyjoy's back and saw the sense in trade; certainly the latest Lord Harlaw was near civilized, what with being known as 'the Reader'. Which was a far sight better than the usual nonsense men named each other; the Bloody, the Fearsome, the Wrathful, the Horsecrack and the rest. Idiots.

Given her nephew's influence, which she thought showed only common sense, it was no trouble at all to let it be known generally that House Tyrell would not be joining in on Lord Tywin's scheme. It wasn't as if it was some great insult that would be given with their polite refusal. It was entirely believable that Mace had not the stomach for so called investments; of all the faults her son possessed, being a fool gambler was not one of them. She did manage to raise him right in that instance.

But. But then, because her instincts were so finely honed, she inquired amongst the persons she maintained on the behalf of Luthor when he was alive, the useful persons who would plausibly have reason to be at the Royal Court and were able to pass on different information.

More useful than gossip, at least. And she had the displeasure of finding out the notable noble persons who threw in with Lord Tywin Lannister.

Jon Arryn.
Eddard Stark.
Robert Baratheon.
Stannis Baratheon.
Renly Baratheon.
Hoster Tully.

These names all in themselves were worrying. Royal patronage she could excuse because King Robert was goodson to Lord Tywin of course; king or not, Tywin was previously Lord Hand. Why shouldn't the Old Lion have the power to sway a less than clever young man? He knew how to handle royal tempers. And where one brother went, apparently so the others. Made sense. And then, his allies from the Rebellion. Why not? Everybody said Lord Stark was like a brother to him. The fostering bore fruit exactly as could be hoped. She was surprised about Jon Arryn, Arryns being so high and mighty, more unbearable than the Hightowers. But where a king went, so did his Hand if they wanted to be sure to let the realm know that there were no cracks to be exploited, no differences in opinion, no ill feelings. Unlike the rift between Lord Tywin and King Aerys. Dreadful business. Hoster Tully was also a surprise, but then, he did have two daughters married to Stark and Arryn, so again, the Rebellion made everything make sense. And she further heard that it was a begrudging, paltry amount, enough for symbolic alliance purposes and nothing so substantial.

Practically all of the Iron Islands Houses, the ones that had any money to spare after their fleet was sunk into the sea. Obviously the thing to do. Very well.

Alester Florent.
Randyll Tarly.
Yohn Royce.
Gwayne Oldflowers.
Derrick Crane.
Alyn Varner.

And various other masterly and even knightly houses of the Reach, that past married Florents going back nigh four or five generations. Some so poor that they could only throw in for one or two shares.

Well. WELL. Olenna could swear she felt a pricking of her thumbs, no matter that she didn't believe in superstitious rot. Lord Tywin did not bother to muster any Westerland Houses. Or perhaps they did not want to be seen as grasping like the Reynes and Tarbecks; leave Casterly Rock business to Casterly Rock.

But Alester Florent. That smiling, duplicitous scoundrel! He was not so rich or fearsome as Lord Lannister, not so rich as the Tyrells, but his family connections were wide and all too willing to follow his lead.

All together, not as influential as the secure Tyrell, Redwyne, Hightower alliance by marriages, but a not insignificant partitioning of the Reach.

And say his gamble paid off. Say that a scheme by Lord Tywin Lannister succeeded, say the Old Lion did shit gold- then all the Houses that followed after Florent's lead would be enriched and beholden to his foresight! At no risk of life and limb, of no need to pay them himself! And if they should fail, well, it was all a gamble, so nobody could blame anybody but themselves for gambling in the first place!

It was beautiful. Wonderful. Awful. TERRIBLE.

It was not enough that Florent secured a royal marriage for that ugly niece of his. It was not enough that Florent secured a royal patronage with the supplying of Royal Navy rations. That man was bound and determined to maneuver in quiet underhanded paths towards influence and power. Why, his heir was still unmarried, to say nothing of his nephews, any of them! And he even had a spare brother to marry off as well (Though that one was ugly too. Axell, wasn't it? Dumpy, with a lumpy nose and a voice like a goose being strangled to death)!

Olenna jabbed her needle into her embroidery.

And Mace could not see it! Her nephew Paxter saw naught, useless Leyton in his stupid tower ignored everything not directly having to do with Oldtown and the Citadel.

If it had nothing to do with knocking other men about with sticks and swords, they were useless!

A marriage, could they broker a marriage? Who could she pluck from her garden of roses to offer to young Alekyne? What was his taste? His father had sent him off to King's Landing, oh, how clever, keep him out of the sight and gossip of Reach ladies unrelated to him, while putting him in the view of Houses with cause to go to King Landing's court, Olenna could see through that stratagem!

And if Florent should aim for a richly dowered Lannister maiden! Gods!

Oh, but of course if she should offer a Tyrell maiden for marriage, Florent would oh so politely decline. She knew it. He knew it. She knew that he knew that they both would do as she thought. He wasn't such a lump as her son. Why else would he have married off his daughters and saved his son? Hoster Tully was doing the same.

She then ordered to have the tax rolls concerning House Florent brought to her for examination. It was too much to hope that Lord Florent was greedy enough to do something obviously unsavory regarding paying his taxes.

He's paid more than the years before.

Olenna pored over the parchments, suspicious.

Was he shielding profits under the Royal Navy expenditures? Services to the Crown direct were not taxable; who had ever heard of a government taxing those that provided services directly to it? But no, there was a writ with signature and seal indicating that all crops, tins, cork, wax, salt for brining, and sundry other materials and wages were accounted for by Royal auditors and costs were deemed acceptable to the Crown and paid for in specie. (That

was true enough. It was no secret that iron barred carts pulled by teams of six or even eight draft horses and surrounded by a veritable small army of Baratheon liveried knights and men-at-arms were seen going to and fro on the Roseroad towards Brightwater Keep. Chests and chests of gold were being swallowed up into that hold!) Any inquiries as to obtaining copies of these official documents were to be directed to the Master of Coin. There was even a separate stack of parchments noting purchases of different crops for tin canning provided by other Houses with copies of writs of receipt to those Houses such that those Houses would not need to pay tax either. Olenna snorted. Oldflowers, Varner, and Tarly high among them. So Florent provided access to royal subsidies! What largesse!

His wheat yields were better than previous years and he had increased the amount of root vegetables; turnips, carrots, radishes, and bulbs such as onions and garlic. These could keep well for long distances and he was selling them onwards outside of his holdings. She could speculate that they were being sold to King's Landing or even as far away as the Iron Islands. He had the usual heads of beef cattle and pigs, but of the individual animals he sent to market, they were bigger, heavier and he was paid good price per head. He greatly increased his sheep herds and cotton fields.

And here the tax revenue jumped. An entire new category covering wool and cotton, in huge excess to the personal household needs of Brightwater Keep and his people. Spools of thread, cordage, and ribbons, bolts of cloth in various qualities and all the colors of the rainbow. What was going on? Where did this come from? How!?

This was truly dangerous, Olenna thought. Every Reacher knew that their wealth was in their crop and that to get crop to market was the greatest concern; everything goes to rot if you tarried. But thread and cloth? They could afford to wait, to sell on afar and to be sure of somebody needing it. After all, the even poorest smallfolk had their dignities and to cover one's nakedness was necessary. There were entire motherhouses dedicated to sewing garments for the poor and indigent and low indeed was a beggar who could not get their hands on a single rag to at least tie about their waist to hide their privy parts.

She drummed her fingers.

What was Florent doing with all that money? What men were he bribing, who was he ordering assassins after, what knights were being enticed by higher pay and better armor and horses? Was he raising an army? Was he besmirching the Tyrell name at the Royal Court? What honors and favors were being paid for with that lucre?

She tried to find out. Oh, yes, she learned well from her own grandmother. She tried to have people in place at Brightwater Keep, tried to find servants who would be suitably grateful for not too many silvers in a purse in exchange for gossip and observations. It didn't happen. It was unprecedented; Lord Florent ran his keep kindly and suspiciously. Silvers would not do for he was paying them well and even had healers to look after their health, had improved the food quality for all servants, had decreed that his family would not require the services of all servants every sevenday (They would eat of cold cuts and day old bread! Or even cook for themselves! Dress themselves! Stayed indoors and entertained themselves! If they had to travel, they would harness and saddle the horses themselves! Absurd!). When higher offers for information were made, her proxies were being reported, hunted down and... well.

Disposed of. He was probably canny and rich enough to offer a reward for reporting bribe attempts! She even heard that he was allowing even the lowest servant to learn how to read if they wished! What nonsense!

Of course, she considered if Lady Melara Crane was somehow truly behind all this. She hadn't thought that prim, proper, round cheeked little Melara had that sort of proper steel in her spine. But a few years, a few children and a woman might change her priorities, might start getting ambitious on their behalf if they weren't for themselves. House Crane was safe, until it wasn't. One of them was Highgarden's master-at-arms! They were reliable, quiet, produced perfectly suitable knights of good doughty skill. And now they've not quite betrayed the trust House Tyrell placed upon them in favor of the Florents.

Olenna inquired and found out, oh yes she did, that Lady Melara was headmistress of a number of schools for the smallfolk at Brightwater Keep and Horn Hill and more besides, outside of the Reach somehow. That was in addition to fostering goodkin and young cousins from Houses that past married the Florents.

This had to be a scheme! They didn't even bother to hide the fact that various of the tougher knights of Horn Hill, for Tarly took his House words seriously; they were First in Battle, were traveling to Brightwater Keep and staying for long intervals, enough to be training, enough to be bettering the Florent knights and men-at-arms. They were the whetstones and the formerly merely serviceable Florent forces were the steel.

What was Melara teaching? What was she making young, unmoulded children believe about House Tyrell? What bargains was she brokering with the parents?

Olenna set to rounds of teas, summoning the women, inquiring oh so nicely about their children, wondering on why Brightwater Keep was to be preferred over Highgarden. Those mothers didn't even try writing first, asking about fostering, they didn't try to haggle against the Florents. The signs were there that Florents offered to foster and the parents just... agreed! The ladies were quietly apologetic and gave excuses; that the young Florents at King's Landing were in contact with all sorts of important persons at court, that all the new songs and dances popular at court were first learned by the Florents and passed on, that new manners and etiquette were becoming the thing to learn for court.

The implication was clear. Nobody needed to say it; the Florents were opening doors for their fosters, were preparing them for the eyes of the Red Keep, were making possible lucrative marriages with the Houses from other kingdoms possible by refining their fosters. The Florents, and not the Tyrells, because Selyse Florent was beloved of the King's brother and because the Florents were fostering Renly Baratheon, future Lord Paramount of the Stormlands. And because at the root of it all, Baratheon fury came in different flavors and while the King's was howling and loud, blustery and powerful, he forgave and forgot, but Stannis Baratheon's was quiet and deadly, deep and still, unforgetting, unforgiving, and her idiot son had forced a lord's son to STARVE. Oh, how he would remember who was at fault, when his stomach cried out to him and he was forced to feed it nothing but his anger. Once you've made a man eat his own boot leather, there were no pretty words to get him to forgive, even if he was of good humor to start out and nobody, not anybody, would say that Stannis Baratheon was good humored as a boy, let alone a man.

Olenna could despair, except she was determined not to waste time over wallowing.

Olenna thought of bringing up charges against Florent. She could bribe and have witness statements made, she could bribe over knights, though they bragged of honor, so long as she found the ones with gambling debts, fond of drink, or weak for whores. But. But, for every move she might make, Florent would have some ready excuse or another. She knew it. He was too careful, he wasn't some arrogant fool like Roger Reyne. One could see it in the way the tax rolls were scrupulously reported; they were expecting her to go over their taxes and not Mace, who would've left it to Maester Lomys or Garth as Lord Seneschal, and they would not be suspicious. Alester Florent made sure that House Florent owed nothing to the Tyrells, they wanted nothing from the Tyrells. It was not against the law to host visiting knights from another lord. It was not against the law to foster much too many children all at once. It was not against the law to make a lot of money! That was not even taking into account though he was outnumbered in terms of army size, Tarly was by his side and the King, too, with that Royal patronage. He had allies, oh yes, allies who knew how to properly fight and strong too, veterans. Not like her son's allies who sat on their arses and feasted. If she were to contemplate any action against Florent, she must needs then account for Tarly, who was simply dangerous. It would not do and it chafed her to know that it was so!

In the meantime, she wrote letters to Paxter, letters to Leyton Hightower, warning them to be wary, warning them to not fall for any offers or deals. Paxter wrote back and pointed out that Leyton had told him that he was planning to throw some daughters and nieces in Alekyne's way again if Olenna had not the stomach for it and Paxter was thinking of trying again as well. Olenna thought on it. It probably won't work, not unless one of the girls was smart enough to actually get caught with Alekyne betwixt her legs by at least two witnesses, because he had to be staying in King's Landing for a reason. She hadn't heard from gossip that he was one for whores nor did he have a mistress. She'd wonder if he was a sword-swallower if it weren't for the fact that he was a noted flirt from the accounts of Paxter from the Lannisport feast after the Greyjoy Rebellion. He observed that Alekyne looked like he had an appetite as expected from a man regarding women while he danced and kissed hands but there was marvelous self control for one so young. Self control that came not from religion, but duty, perhaps.

When Olenna tested Lord Alester's patience by issuing invitations to him for various feasts and tourneys, obviously to draw him out with conversation, she of course tried to play on his vanity by inquiring after his son. He was as proud of his heir as he ought to be and he did say that he was gladdened by the improvements to Brightwater Keep that Alekyne was suggesting and the successes from thereof. Something about enterprise. Just her luck, his heir wasn't a wastrel that could be led around by his cock! He was one who could be depended upon. He was one who knew a thing or two about how to seem and how to behave!

She went about finding out if there was some division that could be sown with the cousins, if there was some way to widen a crack there.

Imry and Erren Florent were not in the Reach. Oh, how Florent outmaneuvered her again! Dastardly! Perfidious! Ser Imry showed up every so often at Highgarden's tourneys, made respectable showing at the jousts and melee, but never broke top three into champion's position. He was just... a comfortable second or third most of the time. The men's gossip said

that he was merry and smiling and game for a round of drinks. But it was noted that he was never, ever, seen properly drunk. He never flaunted his status as a veteran of the Greyjoy Rebellion, but she heard, not that she could tell because she never cared to know, that his skills at fighting were battle-hardened, quick of movement, sure and accurate from experience. He was nearly a hedge knight, for his armor was unadorned grey, only the helmet embellished by being forged to resemble a fox's head, with the ears turned back aggressively. He didn't even have a squire! He was always needing to borrow one or another at whatever host he ended up at. Olenna tried to gain audience to one or other of these squires for this was an opening, but they couldn't say anything at all. No whores for this one, though he did gamble, but only for the amusement of it, not at all putting in high stakes (could not be coaxed or bullied into putting down higher stakes, he was of firm character), and he kept his own armor in good condition, kept his horse in good health himself.

He was questioned about it, and he had said in a jesting tone (but much truth can be revealed in jest, she knew) that he was not rich, it was his uncle that was rich. He fought hard during tourneys because there was a real chance that he might lose his armor and horse if the winner was not rich or gracious enough to allow him to keep them should he lose. Of course his Lord uncle would never allow him to permanently be without horse or armor, but it was the principle of the thing; it was easily found out that he kept his winnings aside for uncertain future needs, perhaps to buy a new set if necessary.

One could assume this was a resentment that could be exploited, except that nobody could ever get Ser Imry to say one thing in opposition to Alekyne. Olenna could admire such staunch familial loyalty, if it weren't inconveniencing her.

And much less could be found out about Ser Erren. After the Greyjoy Rebellion, that one disappeared completely out of the Reach; in King's Landing, or who knows where. For all she knew he was in Essos, joined up with a sellword company like the Second Sons to make his fortune, as so many younger sons did.

The youngest nephews were out of the question and it seemed like they would be finding their places in Lord Renly's coterie in the Stormlands when the time came.

Mace had brought up last dinner that he was planning to go to King's Landing for the ship launch, not because he cared about Lord Tywin's scheme or some new ship, but because it was the first and only Royal invitation to court House Tyrell had received since that wedding between Lord Stannis and Lady Selyse. He nattered on about what they might eat at the feast. The FEAST, oh why did she have to have a son who thought more about his belly than his family! It was as if he wanted to give her nightmares of growing ever more sideways and becoming as heavy and flatulent as her goodbrother Garth the Gross!

She would simply have to show up herself, if anything was to be done at King's Landing. She would have to find out what's what because her son was incapable and there was only so much that could be depended upon with her nephew Paxter; she had to think of her grandchildren. Willas could not be seen in public, the poor boy. Garlan would do. Thirteen and fully able to sit still, dance a few dances, too young to get sick by drinking too much and otherwise make a disgrace of the Tyrell name.

She made it known that she was going too and there was a tiresome amount of whining. Whining, Mace was a grown man, how could he shame her so!?

She hit his shin with her cane and ordered the maidservants to begin the packing. She made sure to order extra sachets made up stuffed with rosemary, lavender, and thyme as well as new bottles of perfume. She wasn't going to be weakened by King Landing's stench if she could help it.

The Roseroad was much improved. The King had ordered that it should be so, that for their service to the crown, for the benefit of House Florent, that it be made easy for their trade goods to make their way to King's Landing. And then he made House Tyrell pay for most of the improvements, as Lord Paramount. Oh, that was definitely Florent's idea, Olenna could stew all day on all the moves he's made and that Mace was unequipped to counter. Same for the semaphore towers lining the coast, mostly paid for by House Tyrell. Granted, it really was a sensible measure and Olenna wondered to herself why nobody had thought of that before. Travel went along faster than before so that was worth it, though the jostling of the wheelhouse bothered her old joints.

They were of course given apartments at the Red Keep suitable for a Great House when they arrived. As Mace went off to do some fool thing or other to bring attention to himself from the King (it had better not be jousting, not after what happened to Willas, or she'll hit him with more than her cane, so she vowed), she set out to do what women do.

Gossip.

Queen Cersei extended an invitation to tea, which of course Olenna attended. She would take her measure of the queen and find out how much of Tywin's influence was forwarded by his daughter. The usual questions about how she felt traveling and how she thought King's Landing had changed since she was last there, and the weather. Olenna had no patience for this, so she inquired as to the other principal ladies of court; wife of the Lord Hand and Master of Ships.

Cersei's lip curled in a way that did not mar her beautiful face.

"Oh, why should you ask after them? They are such uninteresting persons. I surely do not care for them."

"Come now, at the least tell me why you do not care for them. Warn a poor old woman. I've heard such things about court..."

Her vague insinuation was enough.

Cersei launched into a scornful reporting of how Lord Stannis Baratheon saw no shame in flaunting his sexual appetite during the daylight hours and that his wife was so depraved that she acquiesced by showing up at his office during lunch, where they could be heard making all sorts of barnyard animal noises behind his closed door.

Now this, Olenna actually knew about; it was too humorous to not be shared. Persons employed by her nephew Paxter had reason enough to pay attention to the policies of the

Royal Navy on her nephew's behalf and to report to him. And of course, he summarized such reports to her. They thought it worth warning him that if he were interested in making any maritime trade related requests in person with the Master of Ships to avoid attempting to meet with him at high noon, as he was indisposed. As in, busy fucking his wife. Loudly.

Olenna had not needed to work the art of womanly wiles in decades. But she did not forget how Lady Selyse did not quail at her baldfaced insult about her looks at her wedding, instead choosing to assert with pride that Lord Stannis was 'well handled'. Handled. With her hand, like as not. Or her mouth. Olenna knew what was what. Luthor once upon a time was well satisfied and then left her alone when she lied about how long exactly her moonbleeding lasted. His solicitousness made her far more willing than she might have been to engaging in marital duties. He was affectionate, her poor fool Luthor. Needed protecting and watching over and nobody listened to her, did they, left him alone to ride off a cliff. If she thought too long on it, it always upset her, even now.

So.

They must have taught that girl, Selyse, well if she kept her husband hungry enough for more every day. And he at the least had to be genuinely more skilled at the work than Luthor for no lady with the wherewithal to engage with Lord Tywin alone in conversation should be a fainting, delicate flower unable to avoid it if she didn't want it. No, not that one. Not the current crop of Florent daughters. She remembered how Randyll Tarly of all people was made to dance to the tune of his wife at Lady Selyse's wedding. That man was one of the more stubborn, unpleasant louts she had the displeasure of knowing. A wise woman could be compliant and gracious, making suggestions and implications delicately so that the man would think that the matters he was doing by her direction was his idea. Olenna knew that trick too, but she loathed having to do so. So annoying when forthrightly stating demands worked just as well. There was no maidenly shyness with the looks Lord Stannis' bride was giving him and the way she kissed him after their vows.

Olenna wondered for a moment if Queen Cersei was some sort of prude. Or was it the lack of discretion that upset her?

It took more rounds of cake and pretending to be dotty, but it finally came out that Cersei was some bizarre sort of resentful. King Robert apparently did not want to be seen as any less virile than his brother and she was not left alone either, though he did keep to evenings as was seemly. Olenna felt no shame with inquiring if Cersei was not being satisfied and if the King's visits were too much of a bother. That resulted in another scoff and feigned shock over Olenna's bluntness, but the freedoms of age were hers and Cersei was easily cajoled into bragging about the King's performance. So that was not it; it was that Cersei was made to be part of some foolish competition between two stubborn men. Olenna could understand that.

But if the King was as good as to compete with a brother capable of making a woman mindlessly howl during the day, Olenna did not understand what Cersei was complaining about.

She was old, not dead.

She found Cersei as prideful as one could expect from a Lannister, the sort of prideful that one gets from being born beautiful from childhood. There was the usual charm and polish of court, but Olenna found no great depth. Repeating something as obvious as a regular afternoon sexual appointment wasn't anything special.

Frankly, Olenna found that the great surprise everybody had about a man as Stannis Baratheon knowing what to do with his privy parts or that he did so often with his own wife was faintly ridiculous. So what if Selyse Baratheon was ugly? Comeliness hardly mattered if a woman knew her way with a man's tool. And if he did yell and howl while it happened, well congratulations to them and all that. Might as well do it often and well while he could still get that thing to work. All anybody could look forward to with age was flaccidity and disappointment.

Cersei did not have interesting things to say about Lady Lysa Arryn.

Apparently the lady was a giggler (Olenna detested gigglers herself and so had some sympathy). She was always playing at a Florent card game and going about with the Florent ladies trailing her and they were quite the little group, Cersei sneered, holding teas and sewing circles and visiting orphanages and public schools (public schools? Here, in King's Landing? What manner of oddness was this?) and singing and playing instruments and being tiresomely like mummers instead of proper ladies. Why, they even invited Essosi visitors to court or even, horrors, merchants to attend dinners with their husbands. Can you imagine? Merchants!

Oh really, Olenna feigned consternation, how dreadful. Common.

Yes it was so, Cersei crowed, they weren't so fine as to have as many proper lords, ladies, and knights to invite to any such entertainments as her, the Queen!

Truly, the Queen was a foolish piece, Olenna thought, sipping her tea. If at the minimum said merchants were drapers, haberdashers, and dyers, then King's Landing was set to become a prime holder of wealth by all things textile. It stood to reason that the ladies should wine and dine the trade guilds and to have them well disposed to the policies set by the Lord Hand and the King, or even to perhaps smooth the way to any raised taxes, for if they were becoming so profitable in tandem with Lord Florent's mysteriously over productive spinners and weavers, the Crown stood to gain much in revenue from business conducted within the walls of King's Landing.

Things were different in a big city, Olenna knew. At the Arbor, the merchants of concern were of course those having to do with ships and everything to do with their building and maintenance and then the ones having anything to do with winemaking. The coopers, the cork cutters, the glassblowers. Their concerns were the concerns of the Lord. It was vital that supply lines remained open, that the seas surrounding the Arbor were kept well patrolled and free of pirates and there was a never ending negotiation over taxes and harbor and gate fees. The men may sit and bellow at each other over such matters, but the women sat and sewed and chatted, quietly hammering deals and letting their husbands know how things really were, because sticks and swords were not the only, best, tools for haggling.

Typical Westerman, Casterly Rock Lannister arrogance, Olenna snorted to herself. It took far less cooperation and delicacy when it came to dealing with miners. The Lannisters always had so much power over their laborers; why, it would only take the threat of having the families of miners killed while said men were in the tunnels or dropping a few rebellious ones into oubliettes to have cooperation and acceptance of laughably low wages and high production. It also took less skill than a well-trained grapevine pruner to hit rocks with a pickaxe to get gold. They could afford to kill a few to maintain peace. Pruners, skilled ones that would not set you back a harvest, they were valuable and knew it. One had to have some modicum of delicacy when negotiating their concerns over wages. She would expect a Lannisport Lannister to be more useful when it came to dealing with wealth gained from a port city's trade.

The Queen did not know her business and with only one son so far, far too comfortable.

Though, Olenna narrowed her eyes, surreptitiously looking at Cersei's midsection. Perhaps there would be a spare, soon enough. Yes. Still early, yet, not worth announcing. Pregnancies were such drattedly mysterious things.

She ended their tea drinking with complaints about aches and pains and purposefully lectured overlong on the best sorts of poultices and tinctures to use, which youth must needs abhor for it reminded them of their own mortality. Satisfactorily disentangled from this most tedious of social engagements, Olenna made a show of limping off, thumping her cane as she went.

She wasn't entirely fatigued by annoyance, but she had to rest a while in the apartments while she had her handmaids find out where the other principal ladies of court were. She found that as luck would have it, Lady Lysa was holding a sewing session in her own chambers. Olenna had her sewing basket brought out and set forth, sending off a messenger and inviting herself in.

She timed it so that the ladies inside would receive the messenger not five minutes before she herself showed up.

Saved so much bother that way and nobody could effectively refuse and leave an old lady standing. Oho!

She entered and was greeted very prettily with curtsies. She looked around and saw that the chamber was less a place to leisurely embroider in a manner where nothing would be completed because it didn't matter for highborn ladies, really, but a workshop-like arrangement. Here, Olenna can see that unlike Cersei surrounding herself with her Westernmen ladies, there are Crownlands ladies present and they are all dressed in the way that Lady Lysa and Lady Selyse are. At the least, their narrow sleeves allow for the more serious sewing that Olenna can see. They were both dressed in blue, with Lady Selyse wearing the blue of bluebell flowers with a crisp white jacket accented with black and yellow braided trim. The seams of her dress had white contrast piping, adroitly curving and bringing attention to her figure. Lady Lysa's blue was a clear sky blue, suiting to a Falcon's wife. Her narrow sleeves were embroidered in the fashion favored by the Tullys, a fish scale pattern. Instead of a jacket she was wearing a short Vale style winged capelet, the floaty light fabric falling gracefully down her back and looping back up, fastened to cuffs secured at her elbows.

Olenna was seated and yet more tea and a selection of cheeses, breads, and fruits set by her side.

She did not wish to engage immediately in conversation and took out her embroidery. With this wordless signal of intent, the other ladies returned to their left off work.

The Stokeworths seemed to be working on little shirts, trousers, and dresses fit for children; Olenna inquired and Lady Falyse shook her head, admitting that her husband was not often a visitor to her bed. Lady Tanda explained that they have sponsored a number of orphanages and public childrens' schools in their holdings and in King's Landing and they are making clothes for the most needy in addition to their patronage. Ah. Goodwill and popularity through charitable work. Sensible.

Other ladies seemed to be making childrens' clothes also. They were sensible undyed cottons, with contrasting bands of ribbon of different colors sewn at the sleeve cuffs or hems, much faster than embroidering and a way to give the orphans something cheerful and their own. Olenna shrugged to herself about this; the costs of ribbons were also very cheap in King's Landing.

Most interesting were the ladies Lysa and Selyse, who were circling what looked like a headless and armless cloth statue, which was covered with finely woven cotton fabric in blue yet again, which Olenna could see was pinned into a gown-like shape. Now this was interesting, and Olenna watched closely. What an idea, making a life-size torso for fittings and tailoring! Why, it would save so much time!

Selyse was taking the fabric and making folds just below the waist, allowing an excess of fabric to drape over the hip. She stuck pins in to hold the draping into position and they took a few steps back to judge the effect.

"There," Selyse nodded to herself. "Balance out what I've got in the back."

"Yes," Lysa said. "Just right. You won't do the same on the other side?"

"Asymmetry's more interesting," Selyse said decidedly.

They then stretched the skirt out, and Selyse began making vertical cuts. Her movements were confident and quick, which showed much experience with sewing. She handled the scissors without fear. The cuts were made in order to accommodate godets in contrasting panels of orange and yellow cloth, which were pinned in, starting just above the knee, causing the skirt to have a goodly wide flare if Selyse were to spin. It was just the sort of gown for dancing in, Olenna judged. Tightness was the impression, and this was a clear contrast to the volume preferred by the Queen with her own gowns.

Trust in Florent contrariness, Olenna snorted to herself. Though, the Westernmen ladies did make comments about Lord Stannis' tastes, encouraged by the Queen's complaints. They laughed to themselves about how of course he wouldn't mind Lady Selyse's big nose, not when he loved her big haunches. Some men were like that, and Selyse didn't even have respectable bosoms either. That woman knew what was what by making her dresses stretch tight over her backside. She would need all the help in keeping her husband pleased

considering what a scowling lump he seemed to be, and one who hated Reachers at that. One would have expected that marriage bed to be cold and him stubborn enough to avoid her out of spite and pride, but this Selyse was a canny one, Olenna grudgingly thought, able to work the hardest target under her thumb.

Olenna would have thought that the draping and pleating would seem messy, but she could admit that this new style of not leaving fabric alone made for an interesting, attractive effect.

Olenna did notice that Selyse would give her brief, assessing looks. So Selyse thought her a suspicious person in the room, eh? Good for her. Not a complete fool.

They worked efficiently at the gown, putting in basting stitches to keep the draping in place until Selyse summoned for some seamstresses and embroiderers. She directed them as to what she intended and the cloth torso and gown was whisked away for them to finish the tedious work of finish stitching, hemming, and putting in hooks and fasteners and inner lining. The embroiderers were given a drawn design to follow; this gown would have beaded work for embellishment at the neckline and the apex of the inset skirt godets.

They then next began a gown for Lysa. No sewing; they were looking through fabric swatches, which all the ladies in the chamber were keen to participate with and possibly purchase some yards for their own use. Olenna put down her embroidery for this, a little interested in seeing what was on offer from the Red Keep's own drapers.

It was then that Olenna noticed Delena Florent, who moved with a languid sort of grace, not like the more athletic movements of Selyse. Selyse you could see riding out with deer hunting parties, not just hawking. Delena seemed one more prone to sitting still, her eyes watchful. She was a pretty one, this Delena Florent. She had not been sewing in the room. She had been almost out of sight behind a wooden screen, taking a spot of sunlight by a window, painting. She emerged, taking off a painter's smock to reveal a tight dress like Selyse's and showing off a better balanced figure, her hair piled up high in that same deceptively casual arrangement of waved twists.

She ought to be married, Olenna thought. It was well past time. But once again, Alester was holding onto her, and she could not yet fathom which House he was trying to tempt with the last beauty from his family. From the Westerman ladies she heard that Delena was a smoky-voiced singer, a reciter of poetry and stories, a dancer, an artist, who was indulged by her Lord uncle with lessons on painting. She actually accepted paid commissions to make portraits and the King had even sat for her! The Queen allowed that her own portrait was a good likeness. Knights in court vied for her favor, but no one yet rode forth at any tourney with that coveted scrap of ribbon embroidered with foxes gamboling amongst blue flowers. Whereas the Westermen ladies found Selyse inscrutable and her raised eyebrow a silent mockery that they did not know how to counter, they were jealous of Delena in various ways. She was well dowered as a Florent maiden, that was obvious. She was pretty and hid her ears with her hairstyle. She was more friendly and flirtatious than Selyse Baratheon, certainly. But these contrasts with her cousin were the least of it.

Apparently, besides the big joke that was the Dragonstone Baratheons' loud sex in the Red Keep, the thing most whispered about was the fact that Prince Oberyne Martell was seen by many obviously lusting after the both of them. A libertine as the Red Viper wanted those two!

Imagine that! And speculation naturally followed in Delena's wake; was she hiding talents as well? All of a sudden there were ideas about how things were in Brightwater Keep and the gossip was such that Olenna scoffed. Florents some sort of secretive libertine family, as seductive as the more beautiful among the nobles of Dorne? Preposterous! Arrogant, humorless, big-eared, whiny, no-good pests, that's what they were and always shall be!

This Delena was no flighty fool either; she was a delight at court events that had any dancing at all and if she did admire any man, nobody knew precisely. She was circumspect with her true opinion; her smiles were gracious and her face more mobile than the remote serenity of Lady Selyse yet no less mysterious. It took more than knocking other men off of horses well to impress her. It took conversation and in this the men made their attempts at amusing her. And perhaps some men tried her patience, only to have tall Alekyne looming over their shoulders like a vengeful spirit, pale eyes gleaming with mischief and violence. And once, he was across a ballroom and unable to get to her for one particularly boorish specimen and it was Stannis Baratheon instead standing there, glaring. Terrifying. The more observant ladies whispered that even the King took a kind interest in her well-being, as he was very fond of the Florents and trusted them with the fostering of his youngest brother after all.

Pretty, accomplished, well-bred, with a rich dowry, possessed of caring men in her family, able to defend her honor, with royal good-kin! Fortunate indeed was Delena Florent and they stewed with envy over it.

Olenna watched and listened as they discussed the merits of this or that sample of cloth. Selyse was decisive, which Olenna liked. She'd hold one up, watching for Lysa's response. She would just as quickly put it aside when Lysa hesitated, taking too long to touch and consider.

"You must love it, Lysa, it must immediately spark joy."

Lysa giggled, Olenna rolled her eyes to herself.

And then Lysa's eyes lit up upon seeing a shade of pink and Selyse declared that her next dress would have it.

"Pink? Oh, oh no, no, Selyse," Lysa quickly demurred. "Redheads mustn't, you see, we mustn't-"

"Well, not right up next to your neck and face," Selyse made an insouciant shrug while holding it up next to Lysa. "It's doing something odd with your complexion. But you love this color and we will make it work. I'll just have to find colors for the trimming, where it sits next to your skin."

Lysa did speak true. Her natural paleness had the pink undertone common to redheads and the fabric was bringing it out, causing her to look almost sweaty. Selyse quickly gathered together different creams and browns (brown!) to go through and soon there was a trio of pink, brown, and cream lengths of cloth that Lysa purchased that Olenna would not have thought comely together, but somehow appealing. Delena immediately sat and began sketching and Olenna was given to understand that she was a principal designer of dresses for ladies in her favor at court.

The Florent style of dressing favored the young, Olenna thought, with healthy buttocks. There were plenty of ladies that would not be flattered by such narrow, tight, skirts, but she did note that the women with concerns over the lower half of their bodies did the best they could by having the skirts be narrower than what Olenna remembered was fashionable years past (and daring to clearly contrast with the Queen) and had already moved to narrow sleeves, which allowed for bracelets and bangles to be stacked and shown off, allowing one to gesture with the hands the way the Florent ladies did and to imitate how they flashed their rings about for emphasis.

Selyse had stepped away, as Lysa and Delena conversed, and that was the opening Olenna needed.

“Selyse, come sit by me,” Olenna commanded. “Things have changed so much since I was last at King’s Landing. I want to hear all about it!”

Selyse strode over without hesitation and sat, meeting her eyes boldly, with that partially raised eyebrow that was silently challenging.

“Noticed the reduced stink, I take it,” Selyse said.

“Yes, yes,” Olenna picked up her needle and resumed stitching. “Tell me, is it a permanent improvement, or did the King order the muck and dung removed for the duration of the Ship Launch?”

“Oh, quite permanent,” Selyse replied. “An entire separate municipal department of sanitation was established and with the proper budget for dung carters.”

“Quite the large long term expense, though?”

“Not when the dung and other offal is turned over to the municipal composting fields and the resulting compost sold on to Crownlands holdings to improve crop yields, which is then sold right back to King’s Landing.”

“Is that safe?” Olenna pursed her lips. “Eating that stuff?”

“Perfectly. Especially if one washes vegetables with clean water first.”

Olenna paused, stitching. Selyse sat, watching her with an impassive gaze, completely silent and comfortable in that silence, unlike ladies that needed to chatter. Not like Queen Cersei, who needed to hear her own voice. Hmm.

“What a lovely amethyst ring,” Olenna said honestly. It served her well to give compliments, as she so rarely gave them.

Selyse obligingly extended her hand. It was an intriguing gem. The amethyst was large, as large as a thumbnail and formed into a severe rectangle, with a flat topside. However, the gem cutters were artful, for it had many rectangular facets in the underside and was affixed to the ring with prongs, allowing for the light to shine through with a richness; the purple of that

gem was very fine indeed. Possibly the deepest purple amethyst she had ever seen and Redwynes knew purple gems.

“It was a gift from Stannis,” Selyse smiled softly. “To celebrate the victory over a hard labor with Armand.”

Olenna raised her eyebrows at this. Well. How... sentimental.

She took another once over of Selyse. There was a golden brooch pinned to her jacket just above her heart and it was a fine work, almost certainly Red Keep jewelers’ work, depicting a fox and stag touching noses. About her neck was a three-strand pearl necklace, the soft luster subtle and not at all competitive to the brooch and ring. It was almost too simple, but the ring and brooch were tokens of Lord Stannis’ esteem and hard won at that. The scarcity made a message of its preciousness.

Olenna took stock of the other ladies in the room and noticed that they were sporting various other new jewelry in that rectangular faceted cut that enhanced the color of the stones so much. Why, nobody was wearing the heavy gold favored by Cersei and the Westernmen ladies. Well. Queen Cersei was rumored to favor emeralds; went so well with her green eyes. Nobody else could really do what the richer Westernmen Houses did with gold; sculpting it, letting the metal speak for itself and dolloping it with big gems. Might as well be wearing doorknobs around your neck. Reachers favored delicacy, more finely wrought metalwork and a quantity of smaller stones in the cabochon cut, like spiderwebs laden with dewdrops.

Selyse had that Reacher sensibility, only perhaps more so, with that single stone worked to the best of its potential. The severity, the say, mathematical precision of that single stone was new. And perhaps it spoke more to Lord Stannis’ taste if it was him who chose the jewel. But the severity did not look out of place; certainly the hard, big-nosed lines of Selyse’s face suited the sparse, solitaire gem.

“My congratulations. He is healthy, then?”

“He’s crawling already,” Selyse smiled. “And he’ll be the kind to want to run before learning how to walk properly.”

“Mind that he doesn’t get a flat face from falling on it too often.”

“Oh, yes,” Selyse easily agreed. “You may see for yourself.”

The boy is here? Now? Instead of in the nursery? Odd!

Selyse caught her handmaid’s eye and gave a gesture. The handmaid left and in less than five minutes, a baby was brought in. The head was bald, though wisps of black hair were coming in, the big eyes very blue and staring, the ears oversized, and the expression of disapproval. This changed when he noticed his mother; a smile broke out and he began kicking in midair, almost twisting himself out of the handmaid’s arms.

“Ooh! Steady there, my little man,” Selyse rose to receive the baby. “Here he is, Lady Olenna. Armand Baratheon.”

Olenna carefully looked, accustomed to babies that would begin to cry for any reason at all.

This one stared back, and stuck his fist into his mouth.

Well. There really wasn't anything to know about babies, Olenna thought. Hope they are born healthy, manage not to die from sickness and hope it was born with a sound mind. You can't even tell until they start talking.

"He does look healthy," Olenna allowed. She wasn't one of those people that overreacted around babies.

"He's a cautious person," Selyse was saying. "See?"

She put Armand down and he immediately crawled over to Selyse's chair, grabbing hold of it and using it to stand upright. He stood there, turning his head and observing the room. He grunted.

"Ughhh, ughhh, ughhh."

"Yes, you are seeing all sorts of things, aren't you?" Selyse spoke to the baby as if he were a thinking person.

"Ughhh. Ughhh. Umm-Umm-Umm!"

He bounced in place and took to stomping one foot.

"Not walking yet?" Selyse asked.

The baby stayed in place, stomped his foot some more and making louder grumbles to himself, before huffing and kneeling back down into crawling position.

"He's been practicing standing. And even better, he doesn't start crying when he does get tired. Nor does he simply let go and fall. He's got quite the control over his limbs. I'm pleased at his progress," Selyse said, as Armand crawled past her and started making a dangerous beeline towards the sewing area, where there were dropped pins on the floor.

"Armand," Selyse called out, getting up and walking beside the baby. "I'm going to get you!"

The baby gave out a terrible squeal and began crawling faster. Lady Lysa put her hand to her mouth, giggling, and the other ladies in the room were also similarly amused.

"Gonna get you!"

"EEEEAAAH! Ugh-Ugh-Ugh!"

Selyse snatched him up by the armpits and Armand kicked the air in response. She repeated this, bringing him over to her chair where he promptly began the journey back towards danger, protesting with piercing squeals when Selyse got up to pick him up. He demonstrated classic Baratheon stubbornness, undeterred, even as Selyse attempted to distract him by

swaying him about by the armpits or tickling him. He was just bound to finish his journey to that side of the room.

Finally, he exhausted himself, putting his head down onto the floor with his bottom in the air and his fists clenched to his eyes, letting out a despondent, defiant sort of grunt.

“All tired out, then?” Selyse inquired, reaching down to pat his bottom.

“Whew!”

Selyse smiled and picked him up and he blinked blearily at her. The amusement done with, Selyse passed him to her handmaid after kissing him on the cheek, who left the room, presumably to hand him off to a nurse.

Well, Olenna thought. A strangely attentive attitude. Granted, this was the first born; everybody cares so much more about a new heir and new mothers were most nervous.

Selyse returned and poured herself a cup of tea.

“What do you think of the Queen?” Olenna asked.

“I think that she is beautiful in appearance,” Selyse replied and wasn’t that just a laugh.

“Everybody knows that,” Olenna kept her tone patient. “But what do you think?”

“She’s idle and bored. It’s unfortunate.”

“A Lannister, unfortunate? What a thought,” Olenna looked up.

“Oh, it has nothing to do with wealth,” Selyse made a shrug with studied grace. “And everything to do with the long stretch of hours in a day. Every day.”

“The King doesn’t allow for as many balls and feasts as Casterly Rock?”

“I can’t imagine that Lord Tywin was much for entertainments. Was Casterly Rock a merry place in Lady Joanna’s day?” Selyse parried.

“Merry enough. And there are balls enough here, I heard that you are quite a sight on the dance floor.”

“Thank you,” Selyse said, apparently not one for false modesty. “The Red Keep staff are very efficient in that regard. The Queen entertains well.”

“But idle.”

“But idle.”

“And you... are not?”

“My husband is quite occupied by his duty as Master of Ships and advisor to his brother. We are occupied with the commonplace duties of lordship on Dragonstone. I have duties.”

“Does not a Queen merit more duties than the Lady of Dragonstone?”

“One expects so, don’t they?” Selyse’s eyes smiled while her mouth remained placid.

Olenna could not get her to say one clear cross word about the Queen. Oh, there were supposedly sympathetic statements full of concern about the Queen’s supposed discontent, but this Selyse was wise enough to be noncommittal, not at all like the Queen, who thought nothing of passing on salacious gossip. As it was, Selyse was impressing Olenna more than Cersei, and wasn’t that bad a turn of events.

Even the giggly Lady Lysa had more sense than to say anything directly about the Queen. In fact, she played for sympathy; her big blue eyes going sad while she softly recounted all the ways that Queen Cersei snubbed her and delighted in summoning drapers or seamstresses or other ladies away from her, refusing to issue any but the most expected of invitations to court functions and other such obvious tricks. She found solace in the company of the Florent ladies and in entertaining the different Vale ladies who made the trip to King’s Landing on her husband’s request along with their husbands to keep him apprised of matters in the Vale. There was always one Royce or another about, as they were very good friends to her indeed. And then there were the Crownlands houses with ladies, who were invited. They were a boring bunch, but as a duty went, being bored was not so bad.

They confirmed and added to the picture that Olenna was forming in her mind; that Cersei was full of petty cruelties, her arrogance barely checked by the work of the King or the Hand, unable to see the worth of the lady’s duties of smoothing the way for her lord husband’s aims. Perhaps she was too influenced by the decisive brutality of Lord Tywin; perhaps she thought Robert Baratheon just the sort of warring king to keep his lords in line by threats of violence. If that was so, why should she do what the Reach ladies were taught to do, to practice dinner and feast diplomacies? If King Robert favored the Ladies Arryn and Baratheon, it was because these two were more useful to him. Policy was established in the Council and these two were useful enough with the courtesies and maneuvering that came with teas and dinners and all the little entertainments that too few men understood was vital to their business. It was from Lady Lysa and Lady Selyse that Olenna was apprised of the current crop of Essosi envoys, their names, the various Essosi noble houses represented by them, and the various mercantile interests vying for influence and profits at King’s Landing from Essos and Westeros making themselves known at court. “I’ll let my lord husband know” was the coveted phrase these guests wanted from these two ladies and they did not say it lightly.

Olenna thanked them for their company and put her embroidery hoop away and got up to go back to her apartments. She rested, found out that Mace had not made a fool of himself so far, and readied herself for a dinner with court.

She’ll observe and wait. It always pays to be patient.

Casterly Rock: Finding Mirth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ser Gerion Lannister huffed and took a pause outside the entrance gate to the Casterly castle, putting a hand out to lean against the wall for a moment's rest. Seven Hells. No wonder Tyrion had his quarters moved up here. It was such a hike from the rest of the inhabited parts of the Rock to this, the formerly abandoned apex. Ugh. He felt old. And he was most certainly not old! He looked around. The view was lovely though, he had to admit, with a bracing breeze from the sea.

He entered and consulted the map drawn for him by Tyrion. Eventually, he found himself standing in a chamber where all the walls were covered in cork boards and what must be all the maps of the inside of Casterly Rock that existed pinned up, as well as laid out across rows of low, wide tables. He found Tyrion on top of a table in fact, kneeling on top of a map, squinting at it through a Myrish reading glass, muttering crossly to himself with an open notebook beside him.

“Tyrion?”

“Uncle Gerion! Goody, I’m absolutely enraged and I must tell you about it!” Tyrion looked up.

Gerion approached while Tyrion stood up top of the map in his stockings.

“What is it?”

Tyrion threw his arms out, indicating the room at large.

“I’ve come to the conclusion that past Lannisters were a bunch of illogical assholes, is what! Look at this!”

Tyrion tapped on the map he was on with a foot.

“It’s not bad enough that ancient maps are laughably wrong most of the time about distances between landmarks, the words all upside down depending on who decided what was “up” sometimes, and terrible inconsistencies with linework, at least that’s all depicting the surface of the land or sea! But Casterly Rock has levels! LEVELS!”

Tyrion’s hands formed aggravated fists which he thrust into the air.

“This map claims that this kitchen, for example,” Tyrion thumped a heel. “Is below this barrack! But I know for a fact that if I were to try to make my way to said kitchen from said barrack, I’d have to go UPstairs. And that’s just for two random rooms within the Rock. That’s not accounting for more and more mistakes as I go! It’s like this for every version of every map ever attempted by anybody concerning the Rock!”

Tyrion glared accusingly at Gerion, who chuckled.

“No wonder this place can’t get rid of its shit and piss! Nobody in the thousands of years of inhabitation knew what the words UP and DOWN mean! Assholes, all of them!”

“Your duty is very difficult, then,” Gerion ventured sympathetically.

“Even if I were to only concern myself with the living areas and not the mines, it’s all wrong. One finds their way about by counting turns and doorways, memorizing halls and chambers by order of nearness to some prominent room such as banquet halls or the sept, and otherwise navigating like some sort of blind mole! In all the ways to find their way about, nobody ever gave one thought to Up or Down.

I only just realized that this is not at all normal: How does one get from the your quarters to Aunt Genna’s; From your door, you go past six doors to the left, ignore a stairway, and take the rightmost branch as the path splits. Her door is the third one. You can only be sure because it’s the only door with the Twins on a banner hung beside it. It’s the only way to know! I couldn’t actually give directions to a lost stranger! Was I going east, west, north, south? Nobody knows. Nobody ever knew! I’m very vexed indeed!”

“What will you do?”

“Uncle. I must have entirely new maps made.”

“That bad, is it?”

“Yes. But they will be accurate, the most accurate maps ever made! For unlike every other mapmaker who attempted to map the Rock, I have this!”

Tyrion took out an object from a jacket pocket and flourished it.

“My compass will not let me down!”

Or else, Gerion chuckled to himself. The vexed, determined look on Tyrion’s face made him resemble his father the most in the moment. But both would not thank him for the comparison, so he kept quiet.

“The only thing that ever made proper sense are the maps of here, the Casterly castle,” Tyrion waved at a corner of the room, which displayed familiar enough maps of the ringfort.

“Everything else must start from scratch.”

“Well. Tell me how it goes,” Gerion took a seat.

“I have figured out that a map of Casterly Rock by necessity would be unlike any other map. It would not be a single sheet, but a book. Each page would be a level. The front of the book would be the top,” Tyrion picked up a book to demonstrate. “The back of the book would be the bottom. Everything else will be in the middle.”

Tyrion randomly opened the book.

“Oh, look, I am in the oldest banquet hall. I wish to seek out my chambers. I go here, down the stairs-” Tyrion flipped a page. “And then I go down this pathway and there it is! Simple! Page by page, level by level, I’d make a map that could lead a visiting stranger from the Lion’s Mouth to this very room without requiring the visitor to ask any servants the way. And.”

Tyrion put a finger up into the air.

“They would find privy rooms along the way to relieve themselves and it would all flow downhill. So there!”

“It sounds like you can accomplish your assigned duty,” Gerion nodded. “Now. Surely you did not request my presence here for my approval?”

“Not the only reason,” Tyrion nodded, before climbing down from the table. “But you know how it is. He won’t see or speak to me otherwise. I do it and succeed and shall not be thanked for doing my duty, or I’m a failure one way or another. I’d rather avoid that.”

“Yes, that’s so.”

“Well. To the meat of it, then. You know that the Iron Islands Trading Company’s first ship is to launch.”

“Yes.”

“You know how Father is going to show up at King’s Landing for the launch, as he’s got a significant amount of shares in the enterprise.”

“Yes.”

“You know how he’s got Uncle Kevan going along with him.”

“Yes.”

Tyrion stared at him, his smile growing wider.

“... No. Why? No. No!”

“If you don’t plan to go, then you can’t convince Father to let me go! And you’re my favorite uncle! Please? You’re the only one who can!”

“But why would I? Why do you want to? It’s just King’s Landing and nothing about King’s Landing is so great as can be found here and Lannisport.”

Well. Distance from Tywin was a big part of King’s Landing’s attraction, Gerion had to fairly take into account.

“The ship, Uncle,” Tyrion put his hands to his hips. “Doesn’t the newest, best craft, one to outmatch anything produced by the Arsenal of Braavos excite any interest in you?”

“Maybe,” Gerion shrugged. “Come now, Tyrion. Why do you want to go to King’s Landing? Isn’t it comfortable here? ... You are not stared at, here.”

Tyrion made a disapproving pursing of his lip, which caused his moustache to twitch eloquently.

“Some persons may stare, but that’s not important. This is history-making! I want to be there to see it for myself, instead of hearing of it from others who won’t understand. And. Well.”

Tyrion clasped his hands together.

“I want to see my friends. I miss them, Uncle.”

Gerion sighed.

“...Don’t you start,” Tyrion’s moustache bristled. “Don’t you think that I don’t have true friends like everybody else does. They are. I don’t know why nobody tried it before; even Father was good friends with Steffon Baratheon because he was a boy once. Why shouldn’t I have met other Houses outside of the Westerlands, not beholden to Father, who have nothing to gain but just me? Just myself?”

Because Tywin would not suffer the actual presence of Tyrion out in public more than absolutely necessary, a proof that his seed could produce anything so imperfect as poor Tyrion. Gerion could not say so; why hurt his nephew more than what the Gods dealt him?

“I do not scorn the idea, Tyrion. I never did. But it’s something all of us must consider.”

Tyrion shook his head.

“Uncle. I say this with great affection. The Florents are not like your drinking companions. We would write far shorter letters to each other if it were so. Instead, I get pages and pages worth and I send the same back to them. Is not my correspondence alone worth something?”

“Alright,” Gerion replied. “Tell me something amusing from them, then.”

“Hmm...” Tyrion tapped his chin. “Ah. Here’s just the sort of jest they like.”

He reached into one of his pockets and took out a recent letter.

“Dear Tyrion. Don’t tell anybody else about this-”

Gerion chuckled.

“Because we’ve found out quite the thing! It has to do with House Baratheon! Imagine! They have an entire annual holiday with strange rituals all to themselves and only now have we gained the secrets! Secrets!”

“...Strange rituals-”

Tyrion waved a hand at Gerion to get him to stop.

“It is called Festivus! Once a year, celebrants gather for a feast. Before feasting, they erect a tall pole, called the Festivus Pole. And then you just gaze at it. Admire it’s great verticality. At no point is it to be decorated or be danced around because that’s just silly.”

Gerion snorted.

“The feast follows and there isn’t anything very different about this kind of feast from other feasts in terms of food. Which is all well and good, for concurrently, another Festivus ritual is observed. The Airing of Grievances.”

“What-”

“Each Baratheon should stand according to seniority, and recite this hallowed phrase: “I got a lot of problems with you people and now you’re going to hear all about it!” And what follows is a year’s worth of complaints about how everybody else in the room has disappointed you. Heckling by the audience is strictly not allowed, to be fair. Everybody must air their grievances and anybody trying to be diplomatic by saying that they aren’t disappointed somehow during the past year is deemed a foul liar and hit with an inflated pig bladder on a stick.”

“Everybody?”

“Yes, Uncle. For fairness. Ahem. At any point in the Festivus feast the family may be called by any member to surround the Festivus Pole and make a Loud Bellow. Points are awarded for Loudest, Longest, or Angriest-”

“Points?”

“But the points don’t matter.”

“The points don’t- Then what is the purpose-”

“Uncle. That is probably another House Baratheon secret. Obviously.”

“...Obviously,” Gerion raised his eyebrows.

“Festivus is closed by the following ritual; Feats of Strength! The Head of House must challenge a family member to a wrestling match-”

Gerion snorted louder than before.

“And Festivus cannot end until the Head of House is pinned. Failure to pin the Head after an arbitrary number of bouts determined by the spectators will result in more slaps with the pig bladder.”

Gerion laughed.

“The Head of House will then be permitted to challenge the rest of the family until somebody manages to pin them. If the Head wishes to end festivities in order to get to bed in a timely

manner, he may take the forfeit of getting slapped himself by the pig bladder, equal to the cumulative ages of the rest of the family.”

Tyrion looked up at Gerion, smiling hopefully.

“It is a strange kind of jest,” Gerion said finally. “I suppose it is funnier if one knew the Baratheons better?”

“I would say that a tradition of ritualized bellowing, wrestling, and complaining about each other is a bit right on the nose,” Tyrion grinned. “Imagine, though. Perhaps Lannisters should adopt this holiday of Festivus?”

“Tyrion, no.”

“Think on it! You and Uncle Tyg can finally just say precisely what you think! You have to!”

Gerion laughed.

“It’s one thing for three Baratheons to air grievances. We are so large a family, Tyrion. T’would take days for one and all of us to say what we think of everybody.”

“I suppose. But if it were to come to pass, I’m sure you could beat Father in a wrestling match.”

Gerion laughed again; he had never faced Tywin in the training yards. The fifth born, by the time Gerion was given a wooden practice sword, only Tygett ever bothered to show any interest in his progress amongst his brothers and actually passing on some his own knowledge at arms.

“He would pick Kevan, of course, because Kevan would never try to drag it out longer than necessary.”

“Boo,” Tyrion said. “You’re being all sensible. Do let us be ridiculous!”

“Genna.”

“Hah! She’d gouge out an eye! Bite off an ear!”

“She’d pick up Emmon and throw him at him!”

They both cackled at this, for truly Genna was the only one that Tywin might have any sense of mercy for and who also would take advantage of any weakness in a trice.

“Ah,” Gerion shook his head, smiling. “Now it is understandable. I had never had such thoughts! It is really amusing once you get going!”

Tyrion sat and smiled some more, meaningfully, at Gerion.

“Well. If it would make you happy.”

“Thank you very much, Uncle!”

“But just because I decide to go does not mean that you would then be allowed to go,” Gerion cautioned him.

“It would only help. You can even say that you’d watch over me so that I don’t do anything embarrassing to the Lannister name at all. See?”

“That might do.”

“Yes. And if he is most resistant, I plan to smuggle myself into King’s Landing using your luggage.”

Gerion blinked at him.

“You have some suitable trunks,” Tyrion continued. “I don’t even need one of the larger ones, after all! Drill some air holes, put in some pillows and blankets, a jug of water, a wheel of cheese, a loaf of hard bread, and-”

“Tyrion, I shall try very hard to convince him,” Gerion grinned, shaking his head. “You needn’t get yourself locked into a box!”

“Good. Because I expect it would be dark inside of a trunk, and then I wouldn’t be able to read along the way.”

Gerion chuckled.

“Now. Is it more effective for you to go by yourself, or should you go with Aunt Genna?”

“Oh, good,” Gerion sighed. “I thought I’d have to work very hard indeed. But if you’ve convinced Genna to ask, then it would be much easier. Why, I probably won’t even-”

“No, Uncle, I need the both of you! You said you would!”

“Very well,” Gerion stood up. “I suppose we should see how she wants to go about it.”

“Oh, excellent. Dinner at Aunt Genna’s. Or perhaps not? If you look at Emmon and start laughing, I don’t know that it would help my cause.”

“Me?” Gerion pretended to be wounded. “What about you?”

“I shan’t laugh. I’ll be too busy looking anywhere but him. I never look him in the eye anyway. Too short, you see, I just end up staring at that bobbling apple in his throat and wondering how it is possible that it sticks out further than his chin!”

“Now- Tyrion-” Gerion fell into a new round of laughter. “Now you’ve ruined it! I simply can’t look at him now!”

Tyrion’s pleased smile at succeeding in making Gerion unable to even walk forward from laughter warmed Gerion’s heart and made him laugh even more. It was always seen as a

disgusting failing in Tywin's eyes, that Gerion would whoop and cackle, chuckle and giggle at the slightest provocation and worse, turn red and short of breath if sufficiently amused. It was too much like their father, Tygett cautioned him once as a child, unable to understand why his eldest brother once turned on him with a snarl and yelled at him until he was in tears. You must not smile so around him.

Gerion tried to be good and obey, until Tywin gave the order to Tygett to marry Lady Darlessa Marbrand. Tygett carried a torch for a Farman maid, but Lord Farman displeased Tywin and he certainly would not reward that House with a Lannister marriage after that. Gerion watched helplessly as Tygett vomited in hung over misery the moons leading up to the wedding, and drank some more, heartsick. He was ill looking when the wedding happened, Gerion remembered, but ever the dutiful brother and knight, went through with it.

So to be good gave you no satisfaction and Gerion resolved to not bother trying after that. Tywin was going to ruin his happiness somehow, someday. So why hold back his laughs now, when he would have no reason to laugh later?

After all, once Tygett did his duty and fathered Tyrek, no other children were forthcoming, were there? There was nothing particularly wrong with Lady Darlessa and Tygett treated her with courtesy, but there was no love there. Certainly Tygett avoided her when he was in his blacker moods so as to not frighten her and would seek out Gerion's sympathetic company for drinking. And for a time Tyrion joined in and they made quite a scene at the Lannisport whorehouses, to the point of causing Tywin to come down upon them like a mineshaft collapse.

He was wroth and made even more so when Gerion laughed.

Now, as he walked beside Tyrion at his pace, he thought that the laughter that had somehow gone missing from his nephew was back and he was glad. He had worried at first, when Tyrion seemed all at once to have shut himself up inside the Casterly castle; was this some sort of self imposed exile? But no, Tyrion was not taking a novel form of rebellion against Tywin; he was busy and nobody knew what he was doing. He began collecting different rocks being discarded from the mines and books began to be moved from the library and he disappeared from the main dining hall, taking meals alone, unless it was the dinners where Tywin expected everyone to show up, just so that he could preside over them in judgement.

Tyrion tried to situate himself besides him or Tygett these times. Gerion found himself charmed when Tyrion showed him a quartz and began explaining all the different things he found out about the quartz. Gerion never knew that the rock within the mines was hard enough to resist scratching with steel.

"If that is so, then how do the miners break it up?"

"It is because resisting a scratch doesn't mean it can resist getting hit hard enough to shatter," Tyrion quietly said, to avoid Tywin's attention. "Just because something is hard does not mean it is also not brittle. Like the difference between iron and steel, you see?"

Tygett and Gerion raised their eyebrows, having never thought of it before.

Gerion did learn more sorts of seemingly useless facts, but he supposed that a Lannister becoming obsessed about knowing the properties of the Rock was somehow acceptable. He did not think further on it, preferring to live day by day, avoiding Tywin and putting off obeying his orders until unavoidable. He supposed that Tyrion was becoming the same way.

But today, he found that Tyrion still wanted things. Still wanted things enough to scheme for them. He didn't suppose there was much hope of success and he almost wanted to tell Tyrion to give up. After all, Tyrion tried so hard on this sixteenth nameday to get Tywin to allow him a tour of Essos for naught.

Finally, they reached a level within the Rock where there were servants posted and Gerion told them to summon litters for him and Tyrion. Tyrion looked at him gratefully and it hurt Gerion all over again. Of course no servants would disobey a Lannister. But Gerion knew, everyone knew, that when Tyrion requested to be carried with a litter, the servants would take their sweet time, until Tyrion was late and it was on purpose, because it was known that Tywin... would prefer to have his son... inconvenienced. It was a form of spite that Gerion had come to expect of Tywin and Tyrion was finally jaded enough to not bother asking.

This time, however, they were carried very efficiently to Genna's apartments. They entered, Gerion gave Genna a hug and Genna pinched Tyrion's cheeks. Tyrion had long given up on getting her to cease doing so. They went to the dining room and Emmon was there already at one end. Cleos had married and he was with his wife in their own newly appointed living quarters. That left Lyonel and Tion to join them at the table; Baby Walder was with his wet nurse.

Tyrion politely greeted Emmon, who stared peevishly at him in faint disbelief before greeting him back. Gerion bit the inside of his cheek. He did the same for his cousins and they responded with rote disinterest in him. Gerion and Tyrion took the seats immediately to the right and left of Genna at the other end of the table, leaving the sons to speak with their father or not for the meal.

Genna was not moved to speak about the weighty matter of attempting to convince Tywin until past the main course, which was roast sucking pig with sauce. She would not have her enjoyment of the crisp skin and juicy meat curtailed by talking about Tywin. Gerion was glad for it. Eventually, they were well and stuffed and Genna told Emmon and her children to leave.

Tyion finished his wine and put the cup down, before he smiled at Genna with the attentive air of a cat watching an unwary bird fluttering just out of reach.

"No sense dithering," Genna chuckled. "Is there? Well. The fact of the matter is that Cersei has been less than useless to Tywin at court. And if one is useless to Tywin, they are also useless to the rest of us."

She picked up a candied orange peel from a dish of sweets and put it in her mouth.

"I dare say that if Kevan and Tygett wanted Lancel and Tyrek placed at royal court, they might as well go themselves, to hunt and jape and dance their way into King Robert's favor

and make that ask. Seeing as Tywin won't. But why injure his precious dignity, when we have you?"

"Would I be that useful?" Tyrion asked doubtfully.

"Things have changed since Joanna's day," Genna replied, choosing another candy. "I've had to have letters from Marbrand cousins to know. Cersei does not write. I can't imagine why not; it's not as if from the reports that she does anything of note at all! Corruption is being sniffed out, and Targaryen loyalists and incompetents resting in sinecures are firstly having their wrongs called out in the streets, and if very egregious, they are paraded through the streets so that the smallfolk may have their fun throwing rotting vegetables at them, and then gotten rid of; Wall, complete confiscation of properties, or worse. Entire positions are being removed as obsolete or useless past Targaryen favor."

"Yes, I've had news to that affect," Tyrion nodded. "It is the Florents behind it. Strategic. Wouldn't do to have vulnerabilities within the Red Keep."

"Which I do not begrudge. But I don't know what Cersei's been doing! I ask if there are any likely openings, and she writes that I should submit names that Tywin would approve of, I do, and then... Nothing! Nothing at all!"

"... I might know a bit about that."

"Do tell."

"As one would expect, Stormlanders are afforded first round pick," Tyrion gestured. "Then the now very frightened, grasping Crownlanders."

"Not surprising."

"Yes. Valemen and Reachers after. We are not being snubbed, but I've been told that courtiers who think only to feast and do nothing useful are not welcome. You should know that lords who can do no more than sign their name are not welcome. Full literacy only."

"Full literacy."

"Full literacy. Positions' duties are being codified. Laid out neatly in lists. Responsibilities, requirements and appointed persons must first demonstrate that they know their business, in the form of summary reports of their own experiences, in their own hand, with written references, if at all possible, by persons not related to them. They must make argument on why they ought to have such positions."

"... Stannis Baratheon never sailed a ship prior to his brother's orders," Genna frowned.

"But he can read and write. And they say that if the King appointed him to any other role, he would have risen to the occasion, because he's just that sort of paragon of duty. Granted, everyone with sense is glad he's not Master of Entertainments and Ceremonies, but there it is."

"... Tywin would approve," Gerion reluctantly ventured. "Wouldn't he?"

“Casterly Rock can afford to have some useless hangers on,” Genna shrugged. “Though the court here has not been bright and... fun in a very long time. I hear that it is that much more exciting in the Red Keep.”

“The Florents are fun,” Tyrion smiled. “Have you heard of that new sport, with the horses? Hammerball, they told me. They just have the knack for entertainment.”

“Now that’s what I mean,” Genna pointed her finger. “You have a most useful friendship with the Florents. If not for yourself, I would forward you on this point. Tywin can sulk all he wants, but out of all his children, you would prove most useful at court.”

“... Just because I am friends with the Florents.”

“Well, yes. Cersei certainly has not made friends of them. Granted, they should be trying to make friends with her, but I’ve report that they did make effort because those ladies aren’t fools-”

“Definitely not,” Tyrion agreed. “They just happen to not be the usual court bootlickers.”

“And they are all proper graciousness and humility! They are not high in the instep at all! They aren’t vicious bitches like Ellyn! Always letting Lady Arryn have her way, agreeable to her, they make her days lighter with song and japes and no wonder, that poor woman’s had nothing but miscarriages. Everybody knows. If Cersei wanted, surely those ladies would have attended to her instead.”

Tyrion’s smile became a trifle false, thinking on the various letters from Selyse and Delena criticizing his sister’s first instincts to be arrogant and free with her snubbing.

“Well. Cersei is a true lioness of the Rock. And Queen. She expects due obeisance.”

“That may be. But what about us? She must needs bring the rest of us to the hunt. What has she done? Nothing. Had she gained the Florents and the other Reacher ladies onto her side, then that leaves Lady Arryn without. Obviously.”

And Genna narrowed her eyes cannily to Tyrion.

“I take that your friends advise the King and Lord Hand on appointments? Bring in Reachers when they can?”

“They serve as sieves for competence and faults,” Tyrion confessed, since his Aunt was so respectfully curious. “Can’t have a bribable drunk and such. It would reflect badly on them if they bring in useless Reachers. For then, what trust can be given to them? No, what they guard jealously is their usefulness. If a lord wants, he must also be ready to serve and give. And gold is not the coin of choice. King Robert has turned his hatred of the Targaryens into a course of action. He wants to outshine Jahaerys.”

“Well. That’s just the sort of ambition a Baratheon would have,” Gerion chuckled.

“And you would say to Father that I would serve Casterly Rock’s interests better than Cersei?” Tyrion sounded skeptical.

“I expect you can do better than uselessly nagging King Robert into taking Lancel and Tyrek as squires. You can’t nag that man into anything, can you?”

“Well. It would more likely cause him to do precisely the opposite out of spite. The Florents say to never underestimate the amount of spite the Baratheons have. Respect that they are impetuous sometimes and stubborn always and that it is only the calm, well reasoned argument that might sway them and accept that once they say no, to not circumvent them. Try and if they find out, that fury comes howling out like those famous storms and you’ve set yourself back double than you began.”

Genna took on a faraway look.

“Extraordinary. Steffon was like that, you know. Remember, Gerion? He had a laugh that could shake you down to the bones and he gave hugs out so freely! So handsome. But he did lose his temper a time or two with Tywin; inevitable, you know. Frightening. But then he would just-”

Genna flipped her hand in the air.

“Huff and puff and smile and all of a sudden the sun came out from behind the clouds. Yes, I can see his sons taking after him.”

“Your aunt,” Gerion, leaned forward towards Tyrion. “Would have preferred a chance of being Lady of Storm’s End, once.”

“... Really?” Tyrion raised his eyebrows.

“Of course!” Genna straightened and patted a braid of her hair. “Wasn’t I a beauty in my day? We were even of an age, or nearly! It would have pleased Tywin to have his friend married to me, and it would have pleased me to have a proper man for a husband, to say nothing of a Lord, a Lord Paramount! If I were free. Which I was not.”

Genna sighed.

“Well. Not here to talk more of father’s foolish mistakes. You know the royal court very well for somebody who has only letters of it. You are favored with very useful friendships. It must be maintained. And to do that, you must be there, at the feasts. It is well that the Florents know you. But do the Baratheons?”

“Lord Renly writes to me as often as the Florents,” Tyrion volunteered. “And Lord Stannis has written a friendly line or two at the end of Lord Renly’s letters.”

“Now, see that? Very, very good, Tyrion!”

“Now what is the use of me,” Gerion said self deprecatingly. “Tyrion, it is as I thought; Genna has it all in hand.”

“You,” Genna reached over and patted Gerion’s hand. “Will go to Tywin and act as contritely as you can and mouth words about wanting to be useful. At court.”

“Me? What? Useful? Genna!”

“Do stop whining,” Genna sniffed. “Have a candy.”

“Mmmpf,” Gerion didn’t dodge as Genna shoved a sugared plum into his mouth.

“It’s all well and good that Tyrion could put the idea of Lancel and Tyrek’s future squiring forward with Lord Renly and Lord Stannis. But the King. The King loves hunts and that thing with the hammers? Hammerball? Gain the King’s favor for us. That’s what you can do. Not our Tyrion. This stag takes two lions put to the chase.”

“... I understand,” Gerion sighed.

“And think, perhaps you gain a place at royal court for yourself and then you need not return here for moons or years at a time! Because you would be necessary!” Genna patted Gerion’s hand sympathetically.

“I do hope that I wouldn’t be too important,” Tyrion mused. “I have work to do here, after all.”

“That may or may not be. What you want is a chance to see that ship launch,” Genna smiled. “And we shall make that happen.”

The next day, Genna used her position of most favorite (only) sister of Lord Tywin Lannister to great effect, sweeping in with Gerion trailing in her wake, blithely ignoring any business that Tywin might have. He pursed his lips disapprovingly at her from behind his desk, but she chortled and peremptorily took a seat and Gerion followed her example (he always waited to have Tywin’s permission to sit, but this was Genna’s hunt, so he followed her). She kept a fixed, self-satisfied smile on her face and settled in to wait. Tywin doggedly continued his writing. Gerion began counting backwards from a hundred in increments of three.

Finally, Tywin looked up to see Genna smiling at him still and dropped his pen.

“Well. What?”

“Is that any way to greet me?” Genna lifted her chin. “I must take it that your work is troubling, for you cannot but be pleased to see me!”

Tywin narrowed his eyes at Genna and then looked at Gerion. Gerion attempted to seem as unaffected as Genna, but he was once told by Tygett in the past that his face took on the air of a dog caught stealing food off the table and it was not the look of a knight. Gerion cleared his throat.

“What,” Tywin did not change the tone of his voice. “is the cause of your visit?”

“Gerion will be going to the ship launch.”

“... Yes! Yes. Ahem. Yes.”

Genna made a movement under her skirt and Gerion was suddenly glad that he was sitting far enough away that she couldn't kick him.

Tywin blinked.

"I. Uh. I believe that I could be useful at the royal court. At the least, see to getting those squireships that Kevan talked about? For Lancel? Remember? Of course you do, and Tygett, too, though Tyrek is full young to consider it, but you were a page at the Red Keep and they could be pages to start and-"

"Cease. Babbling."

Tywin sat, with his hands on his desk, motionless. Staring at him. Gerion's eyes were starting to go dry.

"Why him?" Tywin's eyes switched to Genna.

"He's doing nothing useful here. Not with Kevan and Tygett with full duties. King Robert is known to be active and has reduced his time spent hunting in favor of all sorts of horsemanship sports in addition to his schedule of sparring. Gerion would suit, I think, and he has the charm that would do us good stead at court."

"You think so?"

"Oh, yes!" Genna nodded. "Do let Gerion go and try. Give him something to do!"

Gerion tried to look eager. And dutiful. Dutifully eager. Uh. Good thing Tygett wasn't there, if he was, they'd look at each other and Gerion would ruin it by laughing.

"You will find suitable placement for your nephews at court. Do not take overlong at the task."

Gerion nodded quickly.

"And Tyrion will go as well," Genna said.

"No."

"Tywin."

"I need him with me," Gerion interjected.

Tywin's nostrils flared and Gerion had to jump in while he was taking his breath to castigate them.

"I shall require further introduction with the Florents. Through Lady Selyse, I shall have cause to be invited to know Lord Stannis. Which means Lord Renly, as well, see? Which is direct connection with the King. Remember what a good time the Florents had here, last they came to visit? Surely they would be so good as to return the favor and issue me an invitation to dinners, at least a full week's worth to get me acquainted with court! They are so pleased

by Tyrion and he would be so eager to help me at my task! They must think well of me if they think well of Tyrion, after all, surely-”

“You do not actually require that little stump’s assistance to gain entry into court. Cersei is Queen. Or did you forget?”

“But she is no friend of Lord Stannis or Lord Renly and the King, unfortunately for us, prefers them to her. And if that is so, he must go about it through the Florents and they are best pleased for sure, right now, with Tyrion. Am I right, or am I right?” Genna quickly supported Gerion.

“Gerion is capable of obtaining the proper introductions and society on his own.”

“He would be starting with nothing. Tyrion is friends already with Lord Renly, at the least! Is not that good? Do not say that you cannot acknowledge how useful it is for one of us to be once again friends with a Lord of Storm’s End. Make use of it, we must always assure ourselves the best position! Cersei does not help us!”

“I will write and instruct Cersei to make effort with her goodbrothers.”

“That’s precisely the problem,” Genna stoutly rejoined. “That you should need to tell her when she ought to know to do it on her own. I taught her what was what and thus far, I am not satisfied with her memory if this is what we’ve come to. Tyrion is our in. Not Cersei, not Jaime. Tyrion.”

“One doesn’t go to war with the army you wish, but the army you have,” Gerion tried. “I would be introduced to the King not as the Queen’s uncle, but his little brother’s friend’s uncle!”

“We need this,” Genna pressed.

“I need the King to be well disposed towards me through Tyrion. And then, you can depend on me: Friendly. Companionable. Genial. Agreeable. Able to laugh at the worst jokes. I’ll gladly allow him to pound me into the dirt for my nephews’ benefit. Eh? Eh? Come on, Tywin...?”

“Very well.”

Gerion did not clap his hands like a child getting candy. Genna patted his hand and palmed a candy to him that way.

They made good time to King’s Landing.

Gerion found himself and Tyrion subjected to a strangely uncomfortable dinner with just Jaime and Cersei to themselves. Of course, he expected that Cersei planned it so that everybody else knew of the exclusivity of her choice and would therefore be eaten up with envy. But it was not enviable, how she made that brittle smile at Tyrion in greeting before consequently ignoring him for the rest of the evening. Gerion hated sullen silences and threw

himself into the conversational fray, making Jaime laugh with his jests and getting Tyrion to join in. As Tyrion wanted to try his best so that Gerion would succeed at court, he was looking to be pleased and amused and managed to ignore his sister ignoring him. Together, they plied Jaime with stories and anecdotes and questioned him about his duties with the aim of gratifying his vanity over his position as a Kingsguard.

Jaime was so well pleased about Gerion visiting that he took his uncle out to practice at Hammerball. Every knight who could not manage the skill to get a spar with the King wanted to show off at Hammerball. It was the thing to do.

They got up earlier than Gerion would have liked, but he was ever easy to the will of others, so he went when the sun was barely risen, putting his horse through its paces. He went through pivots about one foreleg and then the other, and was concentrating so hard at keeping control of his mount that he missed others entering the training yard and observing.

The tall, strapping youth with the black hair and bright yellow jacket with the black embroidered antler racks on the upper arms must be Lord Renly. Gerion waved and Lord Renly smiled and waved back. This was a good start!

They eventually formed a pick up game of other newcomers and it was just Gerion's luck, Stannis Baratheon was there too! As the brothers were regulars at the game, they removed their jackets to reveal cotton shirts with turned down collars that buttoned partway down the front with short sleeves, in bright yellow. It seemed that they were well prepared for the rigorousness of the exercise, along with their mounts; braided tails and the manes trimmed short in the name of avoiding risks of entanglements. They also strapped on simple helmets and Gerion looked to Jaime.

"I'll get you one to borrow, Uncle," Jaime called out, waving down a servant.

Gerion followed after the Baratheons and stripped down to his shirt.

The game started in due course and Gerion found it quite refreshing. He missed his swings more often than not, but the lack of danger from his horse stumbling on rocks or sudden hidden drops in undergrowth made the activity much more fun than going on a hunt. His arm was pleasantly sore, a sign of good effort and he even thought his whole body would ache even after sleeping at a reasonable hour that night, because he had not had to gallop pell mell in such a long time. In the end, his team lost against the team with the Baratheons, but it was well.

They began walking the horses around the perimeter of the field to cool them down.

Lord Renly was welcoming and mentioned Tyrion and Gerion was glad to speak of him. He was so absorbed and making pains to be agreeable and good company to be worth his introduction that Lord Stannis' suddenly raised voice startled him.

"What do you mean?" he snapped.

Gerion looked around.

Some Rambton knight was the focus of Lord Stannis' glare.

"I said," the man said in an overly informal tone. "Would that I could make my wife attend to me a noon as you make yours."

Gerion glanced to his side, at Jaime. Jaime's face had went to stone.

"I don't make my wife do anything," Stannis said impatiently. "You are mistaken."

"... Oh, we are all men here," the knight continued. "You cannot mean to continue the mummerly that nobody knows about how you make your wife lay with you at noon. A goodly, obedient wife, she is!"

"I repeat this just once more," Stannis' jaw worked. "I do not make my wife do anything. You cease saying so."

They stared at each other in mutual confusion.

"You mean to deny that she lays with you near every noon?" the knight scoffed.

"No. What-" Stannis' already thin lips thinned. "Ah. I see."

Stannis tilted his head.

"It's because you are bad in bed. That you must make your wife. I am not. So my wife goes to me out of her own desire."

All conversation between everybody was silenced and Gerion felt an embarrassed laugh tickling its way in his belly. No, no, he must hear this out, he can't-

"I say, my lord, that's uncalled for! I am not-"

"You are bad in bed," Stannis remorselessly continued, his voice a carrying rumble. "My sympathies to your wife."

"HAH! Hah-hah!" Gerion couldn't help it; it came out more a squawk than a leonine roar but the effect was enough; the knight reddened.

"I-"

"No. That is not in question," Stannis went on. "Let it be known lest there be any confusion; women don't have time for a one minute man. A two pump chump. A dull bore that makes the evenings yet one more chore. A woman does not want to close her eyes and start taking pantry inventory during the act."

Gerion was bent over his saddle, futility clutching at his sides. He was sure he sounded like he was dying. Lord Renly was making wheezing noises.

"I know how to fuck!" the knight shouted.

“Do you? Do you know that when you are doing it correctly, it goes in dry and should come out wet? That ‘faster’ and ‘harder’ mean different things and that when she tells you to not stop, that doesn’t mean you speed up, slow down, or any other thing but continuing to do what you are doing at precisely the same rhythm until she gets that climax? No. Of course not, with all this talk of making and ordering. My wife wants me. You are seriously mistaken.”

Gerion looked up and promptly had to look down. Only one other person in his entire life had that same ability to just stare, an unblinking gaze of contempt that could curdle milk while speaking. But the idea of Tywin saying such things-! It made it worse and Gerion was starting to hurt deep in his belly.

“Say it. Say that you don’t know how to fuck.”

“My lord-”

“Say it.”

The knight looked around, red as a beet, the spectators to his shame completely unwilling to help.

“Say that you don’t know how to use your cock, your fingers, your tongue-”

“Seven preserve us!” another knight muttered.

“Because you are a know-nothing bad fuck.”

“...I don’t know.”

“Specify.”

“I don’t know how to fuck, my lord,” the knight choked out.

“And I do.”

“... And you do, my lord.”

“That’s right. I’m sure with effort and obedience to your wife’s responses that you can improve to tolerable ability. Do enjoy the rest of the festivities and the hospitality of the Red Keep. You are dismissed.”

The knight spurred his horse and he was away.

Gerion fairly howled. He started to cough from the force of it and everybody else, except for Stannis, was laughing. Even Jaime cracked a smile. He was the most strained; he had apparently retreated into trained Kingsguard impassivity in a form of self defense to Stannis' display.

“Gods, brother, what was that about? Did the man harm you in some way in the past?”

“No,” Stannis frowned at Renly. “It is just that he is completely incorrect. I shall not have lies spread about me ordering Selyse around when she-”

“Please. Stop,” Renly held his hands to his ears. “LALALALA-I-CAN’T-HEAR-YOU!”

“Very well,” Stannis said.

And shut up.

Which was good because Gerion needed to breathe.

He was glad to be first to inform Tyrion of what happened and Tyrion had to sit down, aghast and vastly entertained by his account. And then. And then, he had to sit at a court dinner, wherein King Robert was apprised of what happened and his laugh boomed out and he thought it a jest of Lord Renly’s only Lord Stannis objected because it did actually happen and the King in disbelief challenged him to recount his words and he did it.

With his wife sitting next to him. With Lord Hand Arryn putting a hand to his face, with Lady Arryn turning red. With Cersei, whose expression was both exasperated and faintly disgusted by his bold frankness.

Oberyn Martell looked positively delighted, which made Gerion faintly nervous, because a Martell beaming like that was just calling for disaster.

It was somehow worse than before with the presence of ladies. Tyrion nudged Gerion and discreetly pointed.

Lady Selyse was nodding along with agreement as Stannis recited.

Gods. That married couple was beyond Gerion’s expectations.

He did manage to properly meet Tyrion’s Florent friends. They gazed at him with undisguised interest and soon he was convinced that it was not because he was a Lannister, exactly, but because he was interesting to them for himself. This was new and strange to him; he had never been more than his name. Tyrion looked at him significantly afterwards and Gerion came to understand that the Florents tended towards this view of the individual’s worth instead of their name. Which was unprecedented when it came to nobles Gerion had ever met and knew.

So far, they were certainly not going to hinder his efforts to obtain squireships for his nephews. Which was a little odd, for there was the youngest Florent boy left, wasn’t there, who could rise high with personal connection to the King. But they were one of Lord Renly’s particular friends, so perhaps their Lord uncle was satisfied that they would be part of Lord Renly’s entourage when the time came. Who can entirely know these things? Gerion certainly didn’t as he had been locked out of the planning and scheming for such things since he was a child by Tywin and Kevan.

As duties go, this wasn't so bad, Gerion thought. And he got to see Jaime again, which was good too. Tyrion was puffed up with happiness at being able to see and visit with his Florent friends. Not bad at all, Gerion thought.

Chapter End Notes

I have a summary of ages here as of this chapter:

Stannis Baratheon: 26

Renly Baratheon: 13

Melessa (Florent) Tarly: 26

Alekyne Florent: 25

Rhea (Florent) Royce: 23

Selyse (Florent) Baratheon: 24

Imry Florent: 22

Erren Florent: 20

Delena Florent: 20

Omer Florent: 17

Merrell Florent: 14

Tyrion Lannister: 17

Theon Greyjoy: 11

Samwell Tarly: 7

Joffrey Baratheon: 4

King's Landing: A Great Assembly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Ironborn convoy paused on a hillcrest to take in the view of the Red Keep and King's Landing. Rodrik smelled King's Landing himself, years ago. It's changed. None of that acrid bite of piss or the smack your face miasma of shit. It smelled like a proper seaside city; some rotting fish, the sweat of unwashed masses, of cooking fire smoke, with a tang of metal from the Street of Steel. They were met outside the Dragon Gate with a glittering troop of Gold Cloaks.

They were escorted with proper pomp and ceremony, banners flying in the wind, horns sounding to clear the way, for a visiting Lord Paramount heir all the way to the Red Keep.

Rodrik looked critically at the crowds of smallfolk that they passed by. They looked well-fed and they moved with purpose along the streets. They formed crowds, wanting to catch a glimpse of nobility, no matter that they were Ironborn. Rodrik and the other Harlaws took the time to toss coppers as they went. The others looked askance, but if there was anything useful he learned from his Harlaw cousins and from his lessons at his fathers and uncles, what with their tendency to attempt getting greenlander brides lawfully, was that greenlander nobles made shows of generosity because it made them popular and showed an enviable elegance of being. They made their way to the Red Keep and were shown their apartments for the duration of their stay and given time to refresh themselves and prepare for the feast.

There was enough time for Alekyne Florent to stop by for a short visit before the expected feast, they were the guests of most importance. Rodrik was glad to reestablish their friendly acquaintance. As Rodrik did not need so much time to get ready as Lanny and Yara's primping and fussing, he followed Alekyne to the Great Hall, where King Robert and the Lord Hand were holding court, with the Lord Hand. Court sessions were shorter; the Small Claims Court of King's Landing did its job well in diverting petitioners to the bureaucracy answerable to the Master of Laws. At the moment, an emissary from Myr was speaking. Alekyne's expression sharpened and Rodrik watched him absently rubbing his palms together as they stood in the shadows and listened.

Interestingly, King Robert cut in during a moment of Lord Hand Arryn attempting to mollify the emissary putting forth the claim that Myrish glass-making guild trade secrets were somehow being stolen.

"You can sail right back across the Narrow Sea with that!" he boomed out. "So you are threatened by Westerosi glassmakers improving at their craft. You'll lose out on trade. Glass gets broken transported over the sea, raising your costs and risking your ventures. All very understandable. But to accuse Westerosi of theft!"

He did not bang his fist on the Iron Throne, mindful of the risk of cuts. He waved his fist with emphasis instead.

“Good, honest Westerosi glassmakers do not steal! Whatever better quality and craft of glass occurs in Westeros, it is because of study, experimentation, and being too stubborn to give up on difficult tasks. My kind of people!”

There was a smattering of applause from the courtiers at this piece of patriotism. The emissary frowned.

“Your Grace’s confidence in your people is most admirable-”

“You will not go sniffing around the guilds,” Robert replied firmly.

Lord Hand Arryn looked uncomfortable with how Robert was voicing his opinions. Robert then settled a glare at the emissary.

“Must I also add that should any Westerosi guild members, journeymen, or apprentices or their family members suddenly go missing or die from a bout of convenient gut sickness, there will be consequences to you and yours?”

The emissary suppressed a wince at such rude Westerosi bluntness, entirely shocking to Essosi sensibilities. He exchanged dismayed looks with his compatriots beside him, at a loss.

“I trust that the existing docking fees, gate fees, handling fees, and etcetera, being applied to all ships entering King’s Landing’s harbor, as established by the previous regime and continued by my current reign in the name of continuity and peace remains acceptable to Myr’s glassmaking guilds?”

King Robert looked overly ready to begin a trade war. The Myrish contingent shuffled their feet. This King was fresh off a victory on the Iron Islands. It was expected that Westerosi were experienced at battle. But here, this Westerosi king was threatening... tariffs? Unthinkable! And worse, the other Essosi emissaries were watching. News would spread, Myr could not afford to be singled out. Any business lost by Myr would clearly be snapped up by the others.

Everybody clawed for advantage when they could, of course. But it was best to catch a competitor at a disadvantage without doing anything yourself. They would not be at a disadvantage!

“We of Myr do thank you for your generosity and cooperation,” the emissary bowed. “You are most excellent in understanding our concerns and mutual trade relationship, Your Grace.”

He most certainly was not, Rodrik thought. Lord Arryn assured the Myrmen by echoing King Robert’s speech that there certainly were no additional or raised import tariffs, making it seem kinder, more diplomatic. Everything was as usual. The usual was not good enough for the Myrmen, but they could not complain themselves into a better position; King Robert already made his decision. The Myrish contingent left the great hall. Alekyne allowed himself a satisfied hum. Rodrik thought that King Robert’s performance was acceptable, even good. He had a properly captainly air about him. The next foreign petitioners were not of immediate interest to Alekyne and he pointed out the different Westerosi courtiers to Rodrik. When Rodrik asked about his interest in the Myrish emissary, Alekyne grinned sharp.

“I don’t suppose it would be too bad of me to tell you that the Myrish do have cause to fear losing profits in glass to Westerosi glassmaking guilds.”

“You’ve figured out the secret to sheet glass?” Rodrik whispered. “The windows on that wheelhouse were made here, in Westeros?”

Alekyne inclined his head in confirmation.

“That’s one less city of slavers we’ll have cause to deal with. Glass will soon be shipped from Gulltown to White Harbor; the North have need of more glass houses. And we’ll be selling Westerosi glass to Braavos. Strengthen our ties to the true Free City.”

Rodrik did not need it said that clearly Florent funds were behind any number of guilds and glass merchants. He latched onto the idea of Westerosi glass being sold to Braavos; if the glass was of quality to threaten Myrish interests the profits to the Iron Islands Trading Company would be greater in one trading voyage alone than any he had ever captained or ordered his captains to undertake... Rodrik felt giddy.

“You are truly unworried about any Essosi reprisal?” Rodrik asked.

“That would involve them trying to invade the Vale to get to the guilds there,” Alekyne smirked. “Or attacking Trading Company ships manned by Ironborn with cause to fight for their profits. What do you think?”

So very secure, indeed. Yes, Rodrik was feeling better and better about putting his trust in the wiles of the Florents.

Alekyne escorted him back to his chambers in time for him to change out of his traveling clothes and into his court clothes. Once there, he was met with Aeron Greyjoy, the last Greyjoy of his generation. Rodrik cautiously looked him over; he was dressed in preparation for the feast and whatever tortures he might have suffered within Casterly Rock’s dungeons did not show in his face. He was standing with a goblet in his hand already, pulling at the high band collar of the jacket he was wearing. He huffed and undid the topmost button. The effect was not ruined; kraken tentacles graced the shoulders and upper arms of his jacket and he was even given a golden kraken pin for his cloak, which he wore draped over only one shoulder in his usual careless, rakish fashion.

“Wretched slave collar,” he muttered.

“Aeron.”

“Rodrik,” he nodded before taking another drink. “Got some scouting in, did you?”

“Some. How have they been treating you?”

“Better than I expected. Never thought I’d respect any greenlanders. You know. But the sailors they got in the Royal Navy know what’s what. Better than expected. They have their sealegs.”

Aeron damned them with faint praise, but what could be expected of Greyjoy arrogance? Rodrik poured out a drink himself and was pleasantly surprised by the taste of the wine. Good stuff.

“Will it be all as we hoped? Have you seen the new ship at all?”

“Now that’s where it be clear that I am a sort of prisoner,” Aeron said. “Not left King’s Landing since arriving and beginning the crew training. Not at all. I’m put up in proper lodging and all that, fed well, but they watch me. I’m not to go out of the Red Keep. Not that I mind. Beats having pissing contests with other prisoners of the dungeons back in Casterly Rock. Why would I cause trouble by being too curious for my own good?”

“Why, indeed.”

“Well. I’m satisfied. They even provide me with a pick of whores!”

“Do they?”

“Ah, yes,” Aeron nodded eagerly. “A proper line up at my lodgings when I like. There’s service and hospitality and then there’s King’s Landing service and hospitality, Rodrik! You should partake when you can!”

Aeron wagged his eyebrows obnoxiously. Rodrik knew it was useless to point out that he was in mourning for his sons.

He also knew it was useless to caution him about keeping his mouth shut around the whores. Rodrik liked the Florents. This did not mean that King Robert Baratheon himself trusted the Ironborn and Rodrik would think ill of him if he was not going to do what he could to spy upon the last full grown Greyjoy. If Aeron was going to be a fool, there was no one above him House-wise that would gainsay him. The sooner he was away at sea, the better.

And I’ll be free again once and for all when she sets out. I’m not worried.”

“Yara and Theon are in good health,” Rodrik volunteered.

“Ah.”

Aeron shrugged carelessly.

As far as Rodrik could tell, Aeron would not care at all one way or another until Theon was his Lord Reaper of Pyke and not a moment sooner. Greyjoys were... stunted in some ways, his own father gossiped to him long ago. Not that such considerations ever weighed much against his ambitions when he allowed for Lanny to be married to the greedy cunt idiot Balon.

It was pure luck, really, that Yara and Theon didn’t show that devastating slowness of mind of Victarion or that unsettling cackling madness of Euron. If he could judge by Aeron’s ways (and the myriad Greyjoy brothers and nephews he’d known before Balon’s rebellion), he’d have to worry about the both of them being lusty and stupid about it as they grew, but with both his sisters Lanny and Nussy watching over them, he supposed there was time to keep

them from falling too far into the typical Greyjoy shortcomings. Then, he hoped that they would show some Harlaw sense to leaven that necessary ruthless salt and iron that ran in the Greyjoy line.

Aeron made to drink more of the wine in Rodrik's chamber, but Rodrik reminded him that this was no Iron Islands feast; he had to keep his mind clear instead of racing towards drunkenness with others. In order to hold pissing contests. Literally. Aeron laughed at him, but left, so that Rodrik could think.

The Ironborn nobles would be presented formally at court. It was most fortunate indeed that Imry was present to explain in better detail to them on the way such things as entering per precedent, the correct sort of bows to make, and to otherwise stand in orderly formation and to remain silent when the King or others on the dais were speaking.

He looked over Theon and Yara. They were bathed and scrubbed, hair combed, Yara's neatly arranged, and their clothes were clean and correct. Lanny looked resplendent; he would dare say more beautiful now than her wedding day.

They entered and were announced in the great hall; he walked forward with Lanny on his arm, Theon following behind, ending with Yara on Aeron's arm.

King Robert sat expectantly on the Iron Throne. Queen Cersei had a smaller throne beside him.

As they made the long walk, Rodrik noted the eyes of the greenlander courtiers on them. The friendliest gazes come from the Florent contingent surrounding Lord Baratheon, Master of Ships and his brother, Lord Renly. He made a cautious sweep of the courtiers in the places of honor closest to the dais and he saw that Lord Tywin Lannister himself is here. It's enough to make Rodrik break out with sweat on the back of his neck. On the opposite side of the dais furthest away from Lord Tywin is Prince Oberyn Martell. Dorne sent a representative? Curious. Lord Hand Arryn is present, of course. And most curious of all was a thin man dressed in the all blacks of a Brother of the Night's Watch. His place amongst the Lord Paramounts meant this must be a Stark. Not The Stark; Benjen, it was. Rodrik briefly supposed that this was not meant as a slight to the King; everybody knew of The Stark's friendship with him. There must be something of local import in the North preventing his presence. Lord Mace Tyrell was here also, furthest from the dais and therefore the Florents surrounding the Baratheons. He was also buffered by the presence of Lord Hoster Tully and a bored looking Edmure Tully.

Rodrik didn't think there had been so many Lord Paramounts and Great Houses in one place since the tourney at Harrenhal. The doings of the Iron Islands Trading Company was looking to be of bigger import than he expected. He will have to explain the circumstances to Yara and Theon soon.

They were announced and they made their bows and curtsies.

"Be welcome to King's Landing and my court," King Robert said with formal aplomb. He made a gesture and plates of bread and salt were brought forward to every one of the Ironborn present.

After the last swallow, King Robert addressed Theon directly.

“Are you excited about the new ship?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Theon piped up as formally as he could, his young boy’s voice ringing out in the hall. “Has she been named yet? Because I wanted to do so.”

King Robert seemed charmed by Theon’s unafraid attitude.

“Now what would you name a new ship, young Greyjoy?”

“She’s the first for the Iron Islands Trading Company and she’s going to be famous. She ought to be the Acclaim. If it pleases Your Grace,” Theon bobbed his head.

That’s a good, auspicious name, Rodrik thought to himself with some surprise. His nephew, if that was truly his idea, was showing some interesting depths.

King Robert caught his eye. Rodrik nodded; it gratified him that an avowed landlubber would ask for his opinion on the matter.

“It does please me. She shall be named the Acclaim at launch,” Robert announced to the court at large.

Theon brightened at that.

King Robert stood up from the Throne and taking the Queen’s hand, descended the dias to come towards them. Rodrik was not surprised by the move towards informality; King Robert was an affable man and particularly skilled at what Imry called ‘glad-handing’. He smiled at Lanny, and his handsomeness flustered her, causing her to color, which made her look young again and comely. Queen Cersei was stunning to look upon up close. But there was a remoteness to her and her smiles in greeting did not reach her eyes. The King exchanged friendly questions to Theon about their journey and extended a warm compliment to Yara.

After the royal couple are the rest of the royal family; Lord Baratheon and his wife, along with young Lord Renly. Lord Stannis was obviously unable to muster up the bonhomie of the King but his face was not at all tense, unlike that first time Rodrik met him at Harlaw. When Lady Selyse stepped forward to engage with Lanny, gracious and welcoming the way the Queen was not and Lanny smiled back, he saw Lord Stannis’ eyes light up with affection and pride at how skilled his wife is at her courtesies. Yara was watching Lady Selyse with a speculative quirk to her mouth, taking the measure of a woman that Imry has lauded as a paragon. Lord Renly and Theon are sizing each other up, being of similar age. They were both carefully polite. It is well, so far.

It was Lord Baratheon’s prerogative to introduce the pack of Florents clustered around him (as Imry was known to them already); Lord Alester, Ser Axell, Ser Colin, Alekyne, Ser Erren, Delena, Omer, and Merrell. It was mentioned in passing that Lady Melessa was here with Lord Randyll Tarly and Lady Rhea was with her husband, Ser Andar Royce, who is here with the Royces, but must wait their turn. It seemed that the launch of the Acclaim was serving as an excuse for the farflung Florent relations to reunite.

Lord Arryn was next, along with his Tully wife. Once again, Rodrik was gratified by the quiet sympathies that Lanny received from Lady Arryn. He was predisposed to like these ladies for their kindness.

Nobody else had the nerve to move ahead of Lord Tywin after the Florents made way. Rodrik was not too worried about the greetings going wrongly; Ironborn can respect a dread personage as Lord Tywin. They clasped hands, Lord Tywin inclined his head at Lanny, and merely looked at Theon and Yara before introducing his son, Tyrion. Rodrik schooled his expression. Yara and Theon were openly staring, which made Rodrik quail inside. Tyrion was used to this sort of behavior, however, and made his bows and greetings smoothly before moving on. After that, Lord Tywin's brothers, Kevan and Gerion were introduced.

The remaining Lord Paramounts or their representatives were more formal and correct, not inviting any further acquaintance, especially not Lord Tyrell or Lord Tully. It was as expected. Rodrik was proud that Theon and Yara were making their bows and curtsies at the right intervals and mouthing the correct greetings.

After the Lord Paramounts made way, it was on to the rest of the lords and ladies present. Only those particularly close with the Florents, such as the Tarlys or Royces, come forward to speak to him. Cousin Harras was comporting himself very well indeed (greenlander eyebrows were raised and their expressions eased when introduced to a Ser Harras), comfortable with greenlander courtesies from being a knight, and whatever else learned from his Serrett mother. He proved himself very useful as the rest of the Harlaw cousins were following in his example, though somewhat tongue-tied. The Goodbrother triplets were managing to attempt at civil conversation with the greenlanders, as The Goodbrother is the sort of ambitious man enough to try throwing practically all of his many daughters at Theon when the time is right, and richer from his iron mines, besides. He'd seen how the winds have changed and put in for more shares of the Iron Islands Trading Company. He wanted to be next good-father to the next Lord Reaper of Pyke and for that, he drummed courtesies into his offspring.

Rodrik thought that a Goodbrother daughter is acceptable, as choices go. Of course, he'd rather that Theon look to one of his Harlaw cousins. But that was a bit of self-interested thinking, as head of House, and Rodrik thought that so long as old Quellon's ways rise and none of Balon's when it came to Theon's decisions for the future, the Iron Islands will be well.

The feast was good, decadent in the way that is terribly seductive after the usual privations of the Iron Islands. King Robert boasted that the roast boar and venison they are eating were from his hunts especially for the occasion. Brisket, as never tasted before (they gorged on that and nearly made themselves unable to continue eating, poor form!). Succulent roasted ducks with crispy skin that practically fell off in the mouth. Rich clam chowder, lemon juiced fillet of fish, and for the more adventurous, another seafood stew turned red with Dornish spices. The sweet pastries were small and insubstantial, but hit the tongue with pops of honey sweet and lemon tartness. Instead of ale, there was Arbor gold or Dornish red to suit and something called Rum Punch, which was very pleasing.

Singers sang, some tumblers did tricks, and as the eating wound down, a group of musicians began tuning. The King and Queen stood up to open the floor together. Rodrik had prepared Yara and Theon for the plans of the Florents to have them at best advantage in court, so they were the only unsurprised ones when Lord Renly went to Yara to ask for a dance. Theon stood and followed alongside Lanny and himself towards the Florent table; when Rodrik and Lanny broke away to find a spot on the open floor, he was able to make his way alone to ask to partner with Delena Florent. It was a little comical; she was more than a full head taller than young Theon, but he was assured of Imry's friendliness and he was more sure of her acceptance compared to any other of the ladies present. Aeron was about to cut in once he noticed how pretty she was, but Rodrik was quick and stomped on his foot before he could ruin things. Aeron glared, before huffing and following the plan; he approached the widow mother of Lady Selyse Baratheon.

The first few notes of an old tune the Ironborn were familiar with was thankfully a more sedate, easy dance that accommodated Queen Cersei's pregnancy; he had been curious about Imry's questions about the kinds of dances common on the Iron Islands. Once again, Rodrik suspected that he had Imry to thank. The thoughtful, efficient hospitality of this feast must be because Imry was tasked to find out what he can and to report back to the King, who could direct the Red Keep's staff. Rodrik was glad to dance with Lanny; she was smiling.

He looked over towards the tables where the rest of the Ironborn were seated. He supposed later The Goodbrother would be kicking himself for failing to send along some of his daughters; for surely other than his nephew and niece, it did not seem as if any of them at the tables would be dancing tonight. Well. It did look like Cousin Harras had found a friendly Serret lady cousin willing to dance with him. This feast would have been a chance for The Goodbrother to broker betrothals for some of his daughters upon the Ironborn present. But The Goodbrother was not willing to spend on multiple gowns for his daughters, to say nothing of the cost of outfitting his triplets.

The dance ended in good order. Rodrik stood up again with Lanny; who knew when they would have such an opportunity to dance in such fine surroundings again. Theon looked to his sister. Yara pursed her lips; Rodrik did not miss the way she cast her gaze at Imry, who was busy speaking with his relatives on his adventure escorting the Ironborn. Lanny pressed a hand to her smile. Yara waited some more, but as Imry did not turn, took Theon's hand and practically stomped out onto the floor.

"That's some trouble brewing," Rodrik muttered to Lanny.

"Oh, Roddy, let her have her young fancies. She'll know the disappointments of marriage soon enough," Lanny replied softly.

The Florents displayed their courtesy with Lord Florent himself approaching at the end of the dance to escort Lanny back on the floor. For the rest of the feast she afforded a choice of partners, dancing with one Florent man or another when she wasn't dancing with Rodrik himself or her Harlaw cousins. Aeron did not see the point in dancing with his brother's widow, instead stubbornly eeling from group of bystanders to another, trying his luck, seeing who would refuse to dance with a Greyjoy, his self-assuredness a thing of brass balled daring. Rodrik made an emphatic gesture in general at the younger Harlaws and finally Cousin

Harras had the sense to stand up to lead Yara out on the floor. Lady Florent hovered near enough that he felt comfortable offering her his arm. Theon was young enough that it was not amiss for him to wish to sit out at the end of his dance with Yara. He returned to the safety of the Ironborn tables, having done his duty for the first dance and for his sister.

Yara danced dance after dance with one or another of the young Ironborn men. Even Aeron did his part. Show the greenlanders that they were capable of more than rowdy drinking games, finger dances, and pissing contests. He observed the judging gazes, the looks of condescending surprise at their comportment. They did not know that all along the journey, Imry Florent served as mummer, singing songs and making them practice at dancing at every stop they had, advising them on things they did not care about before this feast; grace and posture, making benign expressions and looking well on the dance floor. Rodrik and Lanny exchanged amused glances when the call for a Foxtrot came up and they were forced to sit that dance out and observed how Yara pouted as Imry swept some Reacher girl past in his arms. Rodrik sighed to himself at the scoffing interest the rest of the Ironborn have in this new dance. Not a one would admit that they wanted to know anything of greenlander tastes.

So he sat with Lanny and observed. All the Florents are on the floor, as it seemed that the dance originated from their House; Lord and Lady Baratheon cut the best figures on the floor. Why, even Tyrion Lannister could dance this dance and he did so with one of his Lannister lady cousins. Alekyne passed by with a comely example of Mormont woman in his arms and Lanny chuckled behind a hand at how all the other mothers and single ladies in the room watched them like a hawk. Until Lord Renly comes of age, Alekyne seemed judged to be the most desirable bachelor on the floor, outdoing the young Tyrell boy attending. How sour Lord Mace looks!

It seemed every seagoing or vaguely mercantile House wanted a chance to catch Alekyne; from the North both Manderly sisters are present, though Alekyne seemed loath to dance with ladies so young compared to himself. Redwynes a plenty, along with Hightowers, which must really be making Lord Mace nervous. The Gulltown Arryns have mustered a maiden or two and it looked like Bronze Yohn has dug up some nieces and cousins to throw at Alekyne. Rodrik nudged Theon and pointed out the ongoing mummer's farce of competition amongst these Houses for Alekyne's attentions. Theon's nose wrinkled once he comprehended the business. Rodrik informed him that as a Lord Paramount the business of his marriage would be more fraught and Theon's eyes grew wide with dawning horror. He most assuredly does not want anything to do with silly, icky girls! Rodrik laughed.

"Roddy, don't tease him so," Lanny patted Theon's shoulder in comfort. "You needs be careful yourself. One year of mourning for your dead sons and then... there are now plenty of young widows back home proven able to give sons. Or maidens, if that is to your liking. You look handsome still and now that you are Regent..."

Rodrik shook his head emphatically in denial, despite his sister's giggling.

"No, no, no, Lanny, I am done with marriage and fathering. I had no time before for reading and now I do, don't you dare increase my duties!"

Theon and Yara gave him satisfied smirks at their mother's successful teasing.

Rodrik wished very strongly for some kind of distraction. His wish was granted when Ser Imry stode over after finishing the Foxtrot and bowed to Yara, who popped up from her seat as if she had sat on a live coal and hastily curtsied.

“I’ve been remiss about informing you that you look perfectly grand this evening, Lady Yara.”

Yara beamed at him.

“Are you free for this next dance?”

“Yes!” she thrust her hand forward to take his.

“Excellent,” Imry smiled and led her out.

The fluting of the ‘Ship’s Cook’ began and Yara leaped into action, elated to be holding both of Imry’s hands for the chassé. They bounded and skipped, Yara laughing. Ah, well. Despite Rodrik’s misgivings on the matter, it was good that the women of his family are happy for this evening.

It was after Ship’s Cook that the fiddles sang out with the most rapid and exciting of jigs; ‘Drowned God’s Hall’. Yara and Theon whooped together and rushed for the center of the floor and began to jig, hands on their hips, heels flying and toes tapping. All at once the rest of the Ironborn tables emptied; at last a dance that anybody could dance without a partner! Rodrik joined everybody out on the floor with Lanny.

They arranged themselves into a loose circle like for a finger dance only this was no danger at all; a test of spirit and endurance. He and Lanny went to stand beside Theon and Yara. Aeron found his spot alongside. Rodrik took deep breaths, knowing what was coming next.

The fiddles went faster, the drums followed suit and everybody corresponded, increasing in speed. Their boots stomped twice as quickly as before. They all grinned at each other in challenge, chins up, teeth bared. Who would be first out?

The fiddles put fire in their blood and they whooped in time. They jigged and jigged and slowly one after another, the others dropped out, laughing, red-faced, and exhausted. Cousin Hotho first, as always, hindered by his humpback.

Theon was young and he sat, laughing, exhausted where he fell on the floor fairly early.

“I’m beat!” Theon called out.

Yara grit her teeth in concentration, which was a mistake; Rodrik knew you had to keep your jaw loose so that you could catch your breath. She fell out shortly, and leaned on Theon as they stumbled back towards the tables.

Botleys. Goodbrothers. Wynches. Blacktydes. Aeron Greyjoy.

His other Harlaw cousins were near the last to fall out as is usual, leaving the true champions of the dance on the floor.

It was down to him and Lanny now!

The Ironborn roared with excitement over the fiddling, clapping in time. They faced each other, Lanny's cheeks red, her heels still gaily tapping away, her chin up and her hands kept light on her hips. They stared fixedly at each other.

"You can't beat her, Rodrik!" called out Harras. "You never did!"

Rodrik managed to lift his hand and give him a rude gesture, which caused more whooping and laughter from the Ironborn.

"Go Mother, go Mother!" cheered Theon and Yara.

There was no helping it; the sinews of his legs were screaming and he felt as if his feet were lead. Sweat dripped down his brow and into his eyes. Rodrik closed his eyes at the inevitability and lifted his arms, barely managing a soft landing as he slowed and fell to his knees.

"Ah-" he gasped. "Beat!"

The crowd roared and clapped their hands, deafening in the hall, as Lanny jigged on till the lead fiddler chose to end the song, ending with a laugh, her hands flinging out in a flourish of triumph.

The best out of all of them at the jig, once again, without a doubt!

King Robert strode forward, laughing, to slap Rodrik's back and help him back to his feet and to bow his head over Lanny's hand. Everybody was in tremendous good cheer.

It was simply the best feast they have ever had.

Chapter End Notes

Ships Cook Dance: <https://youtu.be/B6CQiM7eLLs>

Wendwater Royal Shipyard: The Launch

Stannis woke one subsequent morning and considered that he would be glad for the Ship Launch and all the other necessary entertainments running up to it to be over. He was especially glad that with the arrival of the Iron Islanders, the last and biggest feast was over with; it was Robert and Cersei's prerogative to impress the visiting Lords Paramount and Great Houses each and every time by region with feasts as they arrived. Luckily, as the tourney grounds were currently occupied by tent shelters as the wildfire removals went on, no tourneys were held. Instead, a marked increase in hammerball and soccer games were the order of the day. He was glad of the signal towers dotting the lands now, which allowed for a nearly up to minute report of the progression of the various traveling lords. It allowed him to prepare for the ordeal of small talk.

Renly was unlike him in temperament and at breakfasts would make report; collected and annotated, with his conclusions on their position as allies, potential allies, or even suspected lingering Targaryen loyalists and what favors or honors might be made to sway them. As the visitors were numbering in the hundreds and there was an ever delicate balance between being openhanded and foolishly generous (as famously demonstrated by the late Lord Tytos Lannister) Renly contented himself with building up files of information and consulting with the Florent copy of Grand Maester Malleon's 'Lineages and Histories', speculating and arguing merrily with Omer, Merrell, and Sam. He even, once the Reach contingent made their appearance, teased Sam gently about his marital prospects. Sam sighed good naturedly, protesting that he was not yet ten namedays, surely he would not need to worry.

After all, he did have his Mother to think on such things for him and hopefully would be able to consider his happiness as well as duty, more than his Father. Stannis kindly hoped so, too. He knew by now, from Ser Colin and Ser Axell, that Lord Randyll was less impressed by Lady Melessa's charms and more by her potential dowry, as the Florents were rich long before Selyse's ideas and enterprise. Given the growth in cashflow from the mills and factories built on Tarly's lands, it was sincerely to be hoped that he would acquiesce to a choice that would suit Sam personally. Renly told him, and Stannis was predisposed to agree, that perhaps a fellow Marcher house would appeal to Lord Tarly's sensibilities; their daughters would understand the duty and tradition. And if they were from the Stormlands, why not? It was a pity that the Caron daughters died of that unseasonal chill. The Swanns had some maids, still, which was a potential good. Or a Selmy! Hornery Randyll couldn't object to a Selmy girl, surely. He'd probably agree that bold Selmy blood would be a good addition to his House line, and reduce the risk of Sam passing on his timidity.

Not that Stannis saw Sam's worrisome tummy as too bad a weakness. Selyse always said that only fools rush in without any heed of fears and that true heroism came from acknowledging fears and working to work around them. That's wisdom. Stannis approved of Sam's temperament more than the strutting cocksureness of Robert. It was just Robert's luck that he was precisely as powerful as he boasted himself to be. Just goes to show Randyll's particular blindness. He got on well with Robert, the kind of man who did not respect you unless you could beat them into a pulp and had an annoying amount of bloodthirstiness. He was too willing to ignore how Sam knew more than any other child (barring the Florent boys) Stannis

had ever met about historical battles and their analysis and he was of the kind of mind to understand logistics, tactics, and strategy as he grew. Sam liked maps. He could be found with the youngest Florents moving toy knights over the older maps allowed to them, recreating battles in earnest, not just in play the way other boys did. Not all lords needed lead from the front like Robert. With good generals and captains, a lord like Sam, so long as his men respected and trusted him, would be no less formidable. Stannis hoped that Armand would be a sensible sort of person like young Sam. And not some howling whirlwind who couldn't sit still like Robert.

He stretched and gently put a hand on Selyse's shoulder. She was still fast asleep. He rested beside her, content to slowly wake up, yawning every so often. He shifted under the covers, stealthily moving his hand. Her nightgown was very practically fastened down the front with a row of buttons. He undid them one-handed from long practice and peeked over Selyse's shoulder. Still asleep. Ah. He cupped and massaged one of her breasts, moving softly. She shifted, rolling onto her back, seeking out pleasure.

"Selyse," his voice was low and wanting. "Selyse."

She made a sleepy moan from the ministrations of his fingers and he kissed her. She inhaled, coming fully awake, purring out a pleased murmur. She opened for him while they kissed but he lingered, not at all in a rush. Her hand was warm as it ran along his side, encouraging him and when he reached down to rub her, it was lovely when she jerked and spasmed through her climax, crying out. He lapped at her nipples with his tongue, gripping and massaging at her buttocks with his hands, basking in her responses and the warmth of her. He moved to join with her then, sliding in slowly, savoring the encompassing feeling of her, of her hands rubbing and kneading on his back and reaching down to grip his buttocks when she particularly liked how he moved for her. He liked it like this as much as their more energetic couplings, the ease and softer cries from Selyse as he ground down, the way she bucked up to his rhythm. His own spending had that same comfortable morning ease and he sighed through his nose, kissing her all the while.

He shifted his weight to one side, still holding her. She ran her fingers through his hair and he closed his eyes to enjoy it. Soon enough, as he trusted her recollections of how the Story played out, this most simple of pleasures will be lost to him.

"Benjen Stark seems receptive towards more communications," Stannis said. "He is still wary at the sudden attention given to him by a member of the royal family. Perhaps you should speak with him, next."

Selyse hummed, thinking.

"I should set Alekyne on him. If he is very successful, we can discreetly start shipping up the dragonglass blades and arrowheads."

They spoke some more about Alekyne. Selyse informed Stannis that this past feast has been illuminating for him and that he was closer than ever before to making a decision about who to marry.

"He's like to have Uncle Alester speak to Lord Jorah Mormont."

“A Mormont woman?” Stannis raised an eyebrow.

“Thrifty, practical, straight talking, and knows how to use weapons. Not educated, no, but also not full of flowery fancies and squeamishness about the harsh realities of the world.”

“Is Lord Florent amenable?”

Selyse paused.

“Probably not. After gaining ties to Tarly, Royce, a Baratheon-! For his heir to go for a poor House as Mormont is certainly a let down. It looks very foolish, indeed.”

Stannis nodded.

“Which is precisely why he will agree,” Selyse grinned.

Stannis blinked. He’s still surprised by the way Florents think after all this time.

“We’re gaining too much attention at court, us Florents. The whispers after Lysa nagged Edmure into dancing with Delena, you know. People have even noticed how Yara Greyjoy’s taken a shine to Imry! Somebody has to do something obviously foolish to throw them off our trail.”

“Ah.”

“Bear Island would be an excellent launching point for the re-arming and re-manning of the Wall. And perhaps we will be taken more seriously in the North because Alekyne has chosen to join himself with a Northwoman. It certainly helps that her uncle is current Commander of the Night’s Watch!”

They spoke some more about less fraught observations from the final feast. Selyse spoke about how Lysa was unpleasantly surprised at the provincial attitudes of Lord Hoster Tully and Edmure, as the two of them could not hold back from criticizing her newer mode of dress. They in turn were unpleasantly surprised when Lysa reared up, spine rigid, and with a frosty hauteur she had learned from Selyse dismissed their opinions as she was a Lord Paramount’s wife, now, and was in no way obliged to consider their opinions if she did not wish.

Lysa had hoped that Catelyn would be present; but she was recovering from giving birth to her fourth child, Brandon Stark. Benjen passed on a letter that Catelyn had written that Ned sorely regretted being unable to come, Robert being so excited, but he could not afford to leave Winterfell, what with young Robb being a child. There Must Always Be a Stark in Winterfell. So it was on Benjen to represent Stark interests. And Lysa, alone, to meet again her father, who expected her still to be a silly, weak, weeping girl who quailed at a stern tone from a man.

Clearly, Lord Hoster’s past secret offense to her was not to be forgotten. And he was not prepared for a Lysa that was no longer cowed, not after being forced by regular habit to

associate with Lord Stannis Baratheon, who was more frightening than either male Tully by miles without trying.

Stannis did not dislike Lysa, but he was sure he pained her as she pained him, for she was just the sort of giggly, easily blushing, mysteriously offended by things he just said lady that he dreaded getting matched with as a youth. They were both exceedingly lucky that Selyse had no trouble going between them, translating their ways to each other to suitable clarity. They didn't quite understand each other, but they muddled on to familiar cordiality and he could always count on her sympathetic presence during the feasts that Robert held; if Selyse was busy doing her duty speaking to and charming others, he could go stand by Lysa and she would graciously pretend that they were conversing so that others would leave him alone. She would make observations about the people in the room and other commonplace small talk (which both knew he did not care about in the slightest) and he would make affirmative noises at regular intervals and she would nod and smile in response to him as if he actually said anything sensible. Made feasts so much more tolerable until he could dance with Selyse.

Lysa flushed when her feelings were hurt by her father and brother, her skin betraying her as it always did, but instead of retreating in front of everyone, Lysa rallied and exerted herself to smile and coax Edmure into doing her will. It was clear that she yearned to make the Florents her family one way or another and as Delena was a friend of hers and deserved a good match, thought her brother would do.

As Edmure was handsome enough, Delena entered into conversation with him after dancing with him. And here, Selyse laughed, was where it all went wrong. Delena found that Edmure had no fondness for singers or singing. She attempted to speak on other forms of entertainments instead, but Edmure was young enough to only care for hunting, gambling, and left unsaid, whoring or wenching. Wenches met at market or inns if charmed gave it away for free, everybody knew. If Delena was any other noblewoman, this would not be so bad, given that Edmure for all his conventional failings as a young man, was kind and inoffensive as far as they knew. And, let us not forget, future Lord Paramount of the Riverlands.

Edmure Tully made the grave mistake of being callow and tedious.

Delena raised her eyebrows over Edmure's shoulder at Lysa as their conversation lagged, and Lysa could not conceal a ruefully disappointed thinning of her lips at Edmure's lackluster showing. For he, the heir and frankly coddled younger brother, did not have the sense to know that it was upon him to impress a lady like Delena. Delena was a court sophisticate, a personal friend of his sister, pretty, and from a House that had power that he did not have the wisdom to comprehend. Delena tried some more but Edmure's callow conversation was not overcome. Lysa's eyes rolled upwards for a moment, as if in prayer to the Mother to give her strength, before turning away.

Delena signaled with her hand behind her back and Erren caught it. He glided over and fixed Edmure with a stare of disconcerting menace. He did this without considering the trout sigil embroidered on Edmure's doublet; all the male Florents were quite used to needing to send off some offensive man or another when it came to Delena, prettiest out of all of them. Edmure responded in the usual way; quickly making excuses and fleeing.

Poor Lysa, Selyse concluded. She didn't have male relatives that were half as obliging as her own.

"Is being boring that great an offense?" Stannis wondered.

"Well. If you have somebody who is not cruel or prone to vice and all that, then being boring is enough of a deterrent. Matches are more successful with some match in interests, some form of excitement."

"I'm boring," Stannis frowned.

"Oh-" Selyse embraced him. "That's not so!"

"But I am."

"Stannis, you aren't boring to me and that's all that matters."

"How did you ever manage to see past my boring ways?"

Selyse raised her head at his ironic tone. He smiled minutely and she understood that he was jesting.

"Well, you're smart-" she kissed his nose. "Capable-"

Her hands tightened over his biceps.

"You're so controlled and secretive and mostly silent. I wanted to make you scream," she purred.

Stannis hissed when she began kissing and nibbling at his neck and jaw. One of her hands began questing towards his lap.

"Saucy vixen," he growled, gripping her hard on her buttocks. "We do not have time- the ship launch-"

"Means less talking, more fucking, yes?"

Stannis' jaw clenched as Selyse hummed and rubbed against him so deliciously.

"...Woman, really now-," Stannis huffed, giving in. "Insatiable."

Selyse's smirk indicated that she knew very well that he was just as lusty as her at the moment, it was only long habit in regards to keeping his duties that made him give entirely perfunctory protests. She had sprawled herself over him, kissing and licking and nipping enthusiastically, chuckling to herself as he squirmed and squeezed her buttocks. She rocked on top of him, maddeningly not enough, not letting him in though he was more than ready. She gasped and giggled as he hauled her up, to get a nipple within reach and slurped it in. Finally, she braced her hands on his shoulders and stilled long enough for him to line the head of his cock up and she slapped her hips down as he thrust up, groaning the rush of it. They moved, with Selyse bracing herself against the headboard. Speed really was of the essence and she

rode him well to the timing of his thrusts and this time his finishing was like a gutpunch of pleasure.

“Ah-” Selyse exhaled and Stannis reached down, stroking his fingers firmly her while he held her, kissing her. He worked her into throatily crying out again, with her bucking on his fingers. They stayed sprawled out in bed for only a few minutes more, to catch their breaths, until they had to get ready.

Selyse withdrew to her dressing chamber to quickly wash and dress, as she had before they were wed. Stannis stayed in the bedroom itself, to wash and change behind a folding screen. He of course finished ahead of her (though Selyse and her handmaid were very quick and not prone to useless primping, as ladies go). He left the bedroom and went to Selyse’s (now their) sitting room where they first met. Plates of toast and jams, juice and lemon water were waiting, as usual.

Baby Armand was there, with his nurse. Stannis was still not used to it; he understood that babies were to be kept in the nursery until they could walk and talk. And even then, most fathers didn’t care to associate with their sons until they were old enough to begin lessons and arms training. Selyse firmly and quietly let him know that where she really came from that was simply not the way; he was going to interact with his children early.

Stannis received Armand from the nurse and held his son in his arms, still unclear on what the purpose of the exercise was. He certainly wasn’t going to coo and make ridiculous babytalk at the child. But Selyse did insist that he talk to his son, though clearly Armand couldn’t comprehend anything spoken to him. He was a baby.

Armand was dressed in a garment Selyse called a onesie. It was made out of brown cloth, with a hood that had floppy pointed ears, black knitted cuffs for the wrists and black toe caps, white spots on the back, and a floppy short tail sewn onto the onesie’s bottom. It was, in short, a fawn costume and when the other ladies of the court saw Armand, he was subjected to high pitched cooing over his adorable appearance that was alarming to Stannis in intensity and duration. Armand took this as his due, rewarding the ladies with gummy smiles, unperturbed by the pitches of their voices in response. Stannis was not comfortable with the attention, but supposed that it wasn’t too soon for Armand to elicit positive responses from court. If he could do it without even knowing how to talk, it was convenient.

“Good morning, my son,” Stannis said, feeling very ridiculous indeed. “Today will be eventful. The ship launch for the first Iron Islands Trading Company ship will be a few hours hence. History will be made this day, if your Florent kin are correct. And they are very often correct.”

Armand very solemnly gazed back at him and contemplatively attempted to jam his fingers up Stannis’ nose.

“No,” Stannis held Armand away. “No, no, Armand.”

Armand cackled.

“An element of surprise with an attack is beneficial,” Stannis finally said. “But as your fingers will become bigger, nostrils are not good targets. It is best to gouge the eyes if you must at close quarters.”

Armand stuck his fist into his mouth.

“Be good,” Stannis said by rote. “Be a good boy and don’t trouble your nurse overly much.”

Stannis supposed with the boy being half Florent that it was futile and only a matter of time before he would be sneaking about silently, picking locks, and asking impertinent questions. When he wasn’t having screaming tantrums, because of course as a Baratheon, Armand could howl like a storm when sufficiently displeased. Fortunately, Armand seemed to resort to exercising his lungs far less than Stannis remembered of Renly.

Selyse arrived shortly and Stannis passed Armand to her. He spread jam on toast and poured out juice for her, so that she could breakfast with one hand, while rocking and singing to Armand. Armand liked that very much, breaking out in happy baby giggling.

When she finished, Armand was placed in the high chair and the both of them fed Armand. Stannis was tasked with holding Armand’s fists in his own to restrain him while Selyse spooned a mashed carrot and pea concoction into his mouth. Armand disliked this and valiantly resisted, turning his head from right to left, tipping his head backwards, sucking his lips inward and out of sight, pinching his eyes closed, and kicking his feet all the while.

He had learned that should he attempt to scream at the injustice of being fed carrot and peas mash, Selyse would pop spoonfuls into his open mouth. So now, his jaw clamped shut instead.

Not even spitting prevented her from her task.

Eventually, Armand gave up to Selyse persistently tapping his mouth with the spoonfuls and opened his mouth to eat, frowning all the while.

With that task finished, Armand was wiped down and given to the nurse for the day.

They joined the Florent contingent and the women piled in an orderly manner into the wheelhouses. The men were to ride, though there was room in the wheelhouses if they wished. They set out, the cavalcade making the smallfolk pause and stare.

The Royces were very glad indeed to be once again an integral part and beneficiary to the Florent plans. The secret of producing sheet glass was by floating molten glass on great amounts of molten tin in the heavily guarded and controlled glass factories within Royce holdings in the Vale, overseen by Lady Rhea Royce. Erren was an integral part of the process, as he experimented heavily within Dragonstone. The most important and secret of Florent experiments were under his purview within the defenses of Dragonstone. Engineering experiments were still conducted within the Foxhole, but once projects started to need chemicals that released noxious or frankly poisonous fumes, details were sent on to Dragonstone. No outsiders noticed one way or another because the ever present stink of sulfur on the island served very well as concealment.

The Florent wheelhouses were very fine indeed. They had sheet glass windows, padded seats, safety harnesses for passengers and the drivers and guards sitting outside, and the leaf springs on the wheel axles made them comfortable to ride. The wheels themselves were larger, with many spokes made out of lengths of polished steel. They were also not ostentatiously decorated; painted black. They made very good time because of the good make of these wheelhouses, being the first party to arrive at the Royal Shipyard.

Stannis spent time speaking with Erren as they rode. Erren's position on Dragonstone meant that he did not have many opportunities to associate with the younger of Selyse's two brothers. Imry was all well and good, but he was the most unsettling in Stannis' point of view. Selyse did not say outright, but Stannis was not fool enough to ignore that Ser Imry had fashioned himself into an assassin. He did not approve, but after reading the Assassin's Creed stories and the improbable idea of a society of honorable (How? How is a knife in the back more honorable than face to face combat?) killers who do what they do out of idealism for a Greater Good and getting to know Imry, he resolved to trust that Imry wasn't a fanatic or a fool. Erren was as far as he could see, not an assassin (this did not mean that he wasn't the prime supplier of any number of poisons Imry probably used. Probably.).

Where Imry was tanned by the sun, time spent within Dragonstone's labs meant that Erren was pale. He kept his hair cropped short to keep it out of the way during experiments and unless he had court appearances, he often had a pair of glass lensed safety goggles on his brow and a leather apron over his clothes. This was not to say his habitual confinement indoors meant he was not capable in a fight; he apparently could climb Dragonstone's rocky and hilly terrain like a goat while prospecting for interesting rocks and maintained a regular sparring schedule with the knights and Royal Marines posted to Dragonstone.

They spoke and Stannis learned that the Florents were very interested indeed with increasing trade relationships with the Summer Islands. And not for the usual useless luxuries such as exotic woods or gems of the conventional nobility, of course. Erren had been speaking with as many Summer Islander ship captains and merchants about the plant life of the islands as he could. Selyse was most hopeful that a certain substance would be available for use.

Rubber.

Erren said that it was quite the challenge, describing something that he had never encountered before, to people who were not at all fluent in Westerosi. There were some promising leads and Erren looked forward to any samples the Summer Islanders could provide.

"For what purpose does Selyse envision this substance?"

"It's waterproof, for one. It will form a better seal than cork and wax, and once we get our hands on that, tin jarring will be improved once again. Of course, it's a race between getting better sealing substances that can take immersion in boiling water without melting and Alekyne and Rhea engineering out a better way to manufacture tin cans with integral lids. Could take years. Which is why I must get it as soon as possible, if it properly exists."

Erren gestured at one of the wheelhouses.

“Selyse also says that it can be used to make better wheels. Formed into a ring to fit around the rim. Apparently it will soften the ride and yet be durable enough to last on roads. We’ll see.”

“Surely you must be skeptical,” Stannis said.

Erren’s pale eyes narrowed for a moment.

“As I’m not Imry, I shan’t immediately resort to threats, my lord. But do not imply that my sister is... mad.”

“Indeed, I do not dare. Your sister is perhaps the most sane person here,” Stannis cannot resist defending her.

Erren looked away for a moment.

“We’re all mad here,” Erren quoted softly. “I’m mad. You’re mad.”

“Down went Alys after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again,” he quoted back at Erren.

Erren looked at him again and smiled in relief.

“How did you figure it out?” Erren softly asked. “It took me years. I still do not quite believe it. But I must.”

“She told me,” Stannis said frankly.

“Ah. Are you, then, held in complete confidence?” Erren’s eyebrows rose and he chewed his lip in thought.

“I am.”

“Then you must take care to not speak to the older Florents. They certainly do not know about the White Rabbit. Just us three siblings, I think. For sure.”

“Who knows about... the White Walkers?”

“Uncle Colin knows because we squired for him and Imry and I discussed the matter,” Erren replied. “Alekyne may or may not. It’s a secret. It’s even supposed to be a secret from us. Selyse is very afraid.”

There was a questioning tone.

“She speaks the truth on that matter,” Stannis replied. “I could explain.”

“No,” Erren held up a hand. “Do not. Operational security; what we do not know, cannot be tortured from us. It is only-”

Erren made a rueful smile.

“I am glad that I know, finally. We truly prepare for war.”

“Yes,” Stannis cannot say more than that.

Erren nodded and conspicuously changed the subject to taxation policy. Axell Florent has been a very busy bee in the intervening years, gaining enough bureaucratic power to push for the ending of tax farming as desired by Selyse. They discuss who the new Master of Coin is to be, as the current one has let it be known that he wished to retire from the position. Uncle Axell would not say no to the prestige of a Small Council seat, but also knew that he had more useful power to Florent interests by overseeing the specifics of auditing and tax collection. He certainly did not wish to involve himself with the vagaries of budgeting the Crown’s expenditures, minting, and the finances of the royal household itself.

Stannis knew that at all cost, Petyr Baelish must never, not ever, be allowed into that position. He has discussed with Selyse the idea of Tyrion Lannister entering into that position, but they wavered, for Tyrion was as yet too young, serving very well as an auxiliary inventor for Florent purposes, as well as the fact that his presence would make Cersei more intractable a problem.

They could not have an obviously Florent presence. It has worked very well indeed that Uncle Axell as merely a member of bureaucratic staff has avoided the whispering of court. They certainly could not encourage more Lannisters. Tyrell picks would be simply out of the question.

“Has not Lord Hand Arryn made suggestions?” Erren asked.

“No,” Stannis shook his head. “It truly is a weakness, but he remains as yet so conventional on the matters of money, despite investing with the Iron Islands Trading Company. And that, only after getting badgered by Robert and Lady Lysa.”

“Not so useful with such matters, the Eyrie Arryns,” Erren agreed. “Not like-”

“-Gulltown Arryns,” Stannis finished.

This flash of inspiration caused Erren to cry out and spur his horse to catch up with Alekyne and Imry, who were riding ahead. Stannis supposed they will begin scheming. He really must let Selyse know about this.

The Florents got to the Shipyard in good time, early enough for Lord Florent to personally gladhand the Wendwaters. There were pavilions set up at the banks so that the crowd would have a good view of the ship. The ship herself was a beauty despite still being in dry dock. He apprised Selyse of the idea of a Gulltown Arryn becoming next Master of Coin. She optimistically approved since it was an opportunity for both branches of the Arryns to attempt reconciliation. Arranging social opportunities for the Lord Hand and his cousins would also give Lysa something additional to use for distraction from her difficult pregnancies.

Selyse’s mother, Lady Samantha, was not satisfied to be a widow doing nothing but visiting and gossiping with other noble ladies, sewing and other threadcraft, and other such

conventional, tedious things after Imry and Erren moved into manhood by becoming knighted. She decided that it would not suit her to go to Brightwater Keep and assist Lady Florent with fostering, though she was a capable mother. Her formidable children were a testament to that fact. She wanted something different to do.

She did not have the education to be useful during the brainstorming within the Foxhole. She was, however, a canny gatherer of gossip and largely ignored by court precisely because she was a widow of a third son of the Florents. Selyse gave her the idea to begin writing and editing a periodical. To practice, Lady Samantha began putting together a monthly newsletter specifically for the Florents at large and extended family Houses of Crane, Varner, and Oldflowers about King's Landing gossip and events.

They gained a positive response, which allowed for the launching of the King's Landing Spectator. Within were accounts of the fashions at court, announcements about births, deaths, and engagements, a Page Six that listed out gossip (Stannis disapproved highly. Alekyne and Imry thought it was hilarious), selected poems and stories, court etiquette examples, recipes for popular dishes at court, some childrearing advice, and any other subjects that Lysa, Selyse, and the other young Florent ladies thought interesting. Lysa especially found it invigorating to write, finding tremendous freedom using a nom de plume. There was a column reporting and summarizing court petitions or Small Council decrees in concise language, that was Stannis and Renly's contribution, as Robert need summarizing to keep up his duties and it was seen as useful of Renly's time to familiarize himself broadly with the workings of government bureaucracy. Renly had reports that needed only a little redacting to be suitable. Imry was encouraged to provide travelogues.

Delena was already successful on her own as an artist; her renditions of court fashions were lively and evocative and her visual guide laying out the steps and hold for the Foxtrot were clear and comprehensive. She happily drew and laid out her images and the first edition came out with beautiful black and white etchings on the cover, which was new and intriguing. Scattered throughout were advertisements for various Florent backed enterprises, because of course Selyse wasn't going to forgo any chance to increase cash flow.

The Florent-owned Bellflower Press went to work and the first edition rolled off the presses to immediate popularity. Their access to literate cloth merchants and other ambitious merchants throughout the South were a boon; pricing at three Stars per edition made them an attainable luxury; a glimpse into the upper echelons of court life. The Florent habit of writing about anything and everything into their notebooks resulted in a journalistic style readily adaptable for periodical columns. Passing complimentary copies into the hands of all the visiting nobles for the Ship Launch was arranged by Selyse.

The Tarlys and Royces arrived and the Florents happily whiled away the time singing and telling stories. Stannis took a seat, content to watch. Renly was singing with them. Here it was fraught. The idea that he would sanction the killing of his little brother is monstrous. Yet Selyse's writings within the Book were clear; whatever fraternal love they ever held had withered by the time Renly came of age and the Tyrells threw their son at him and catered to the worst of his young vanity, turning him into a foolhardy, ambitious fop.

It was not to be borne.

Stannis had a difficult time coming to terms with Renly's future bed partner preferences. Selyse had very firmly stated that as there was nothing wrong with Tyrion Lannister being a dwarf, there was similarly nothing wrong with Renly for being homosexual. What an odd term. It did sound more dignified than sword-swallower, though. He also thought that as he did not hold with the Seven, their strictures on sexual appetites should similarly hold no sway. He was concerned about whether or not this was some sort of latent form of Targaryen madness that entered into the Baratheon line. Selyse did not see it that way and only told him that Renly's preferences had no bearing to the development of his character and morality. Stannis hoped it was so.

As far as they could plan, when Renly came of age this time and it was time for him to take control of Storm's End, Omer or Merrell (or possibly both) would go with him, to keep a moderating influence on him. The idea that any younger member of the Florent Fox Pack being a good influence was quite the jape, but that was all they could do so far besides the more structured training in his lordly duties than implied in The Story. Stannis wanted to expressly forbid any squiring of Tyrells, but Selyse thought that perhaps that would only make any Tyrell more tempting. Apparently for some people, gaining the forbidden was even greater a pleasure than most. Stannis did not understand. Selyse hoped to rely on Omer and Merrell, being very good at mocking people, to keep on having scurrilous opinions about the Tyrells, which would make Renly more likely to laugh at the Tyrells than try to bed any of them.

There is no telling, of course. Many a maid had her head turned by unsuitable dashing knights and apparently that same dreamy foolishness can be found amongst men of Renly's ilk.

There was hope, of course. Selyse thought Renly was turning out to be much more sensible at this time and he remained loving and affectionate towards them. Here, Stannis knew to be thankful. He was honest enough with himself to know that without Selyse's determined affections and the bracing cheer of the Florents at large, he would not be able to cultivate a properly brotherly relationship with Renly.

"Good morn, my lord," Davos stepped into view. He has ridden out by himself from his usual assigned quarters in the Red Keep and unused as he is to riding at all, it says something about the laggardly habits of the rest of the court that he's here before all of them.

Stannis clasped his hand.

"Good morn, Ser Davos. Your wife and sons are well?"

"All well, Lord Stannis."

Davos settled to give an accounting of wife and his youngest boys. His elder sons were being groomed for proper captainships, having learned their letters and being assigned to experienced captains and crews of the Royal Fleet. Selyse insisted that Davos have regular weeks away from King's Landing to spend with his wife at Seaworth Keep. He had just arrived from a trip back to King's Landing and Stannis saw that his spirits were better from the visit.

The Ironmen arrive next, eager to get a look at the ship. The Florents have very capably arranged for outriders familiar with the route. The Greyjoys stepped out of the lent wheelhouse, quickly surrounded by their Ironborn entourage, to the greetings of the Florents and made their way to the pavilions to view the ship on the opposite shore.

Davos muttered under his breath that he's never seen men fall in love all at once in a group, but they were witnessing it at this moment. The Ironborn murmured and pointed, awed and eyes wide.

"She's beautiful!" Theon breathed, bouncing on his feet. "The most beautiful ship in the world!"

"Magnificent," Lord Rodrik agreed.

"Queen of the waves," Lady Alannys sighed and Yara nodded emphatically.

The Acclaim was sleek like a knife, gleaming brass on her hull, her tall, tall masts wreathed in rigging. Her masts were the tallest they have ever seen and yet, instead of causing them to think that she is unseaworthy, they believed in her.

She has been readied for launch the day before; it would only require the cutting of the ceremonial rope tethering her to dry land before the true work of greased rollers and scores of chains and winches would go into action setting her free into the sea.

Finally, FINALLY, the rest of the court arrived. They stood and gazed in awe of the Acclaim as the Ironmen did. After giving her their just dues and admiration, Robert and Cersei (and attendant King's Guard), he and Selyse, Lord Rodrik and the Greyjoys, a priest of the Drowned God, and a septon were taken by a ferry boat to the opposite shore where the the Acclaim waited for them.

They made the climb onto the deck of the Acclaim herself. They stood for the traditional Ironmen ship launch ceremony; the priest of the Drowned God raised his arms and warbled out a disconcerting invocative chant to the Drowned God, madly shook a rattle made out of seashells and twirled in circles in a frenzied dance, making his headdress and neck wreath made out of seaweed shake and flop about while flinging handfuls of salt from a bag fastened to his belt all over the deck. He finished by shaking salt water from a waterskin onto the prow.

After him, the septon's invocations for the blessings of the Seven are very sedate indeed as there was no shouting, waving of arms, dancing about, or throwing of objects.

They climbed back down onto dry land and went to the ceremonial rope that served as the metaphorical umbilical cord of the Acclaim. A suitably finely worked axe was presented to King Robert. He had the instincts of a mummer enough to bow and present it to young Theon. After getting a nod from Lord Rodrik, Theon made a good swing of the axe on the rope. It was thick and more than a match for a boy. Theon handed it over to his sister, who gave a good strike. After that, it was Robert's turn and his strength hewed the rope in one swing.

It was a signal and the shipyard workers set to work after making a series of signaling whistles. The chains on the winches groaned and the *Acclaim* slid her way into the water. It went off without a hitch. They had to hastily retreat as the *Acclaim*'s mass made the displacing seawater rise towards them in a wave. Robert had to laughingly pick up the pregnant Cersei into his arms and run to avoid the water, with her making an undignified squawk. The crowd at the pavilions raised a cheer, waving handkerchiefs into the air.

There were ferries taking the ship's crew to the *Acclaim*. It was not just the crew; all the Ironmen present have been taken with a raucous celebratory spirit. They convinced the crew to allow them onto the *Acclaim* and soon enough the Ironmen Lords were climbing onto the rigging, daringly balancing themselves on the tallest spars, running their hands lovingly over the ropes. Theon and Yara were forced by Lady Alannys to keep their feet on the deck, thank you, while they made conversation with their Uncle Aeron, who gladly spoke to them of his time with fellow selected Ironborn training for how to handle a sailing ship of the *Acclaim*'s type from a Royal Fleet crew. For the coming days, they will put the *Acclaim* and her new mixed crew of former Royal Fleet captain and navigator and Ironborn through their paces within the Blackwater, before loading her with cargo provided by the Florents and heading out to Braavos.

The crowd lingered long at the site of the ship launch enough such that an informal outdoor late lunch was the order of the day. The Royal Shipyard cafeteria was already used to feeding crowds of workers and the Florents had prepped the Wendwaters of the possibility. The Wendwaters had arranged cloth pavilions for the purpose and set out tables and boards were laid over crates or barrels to form impromptu benches or tables as well. Soups and bread bundles were the order of the day.

It was relaxing enough while eating, but unfortunately, it would not do for Selyse to remain beside Stannis too long. Already, she was at work, going to Lysa and Rhea, mustering up before a concerted effort to corner the Gulltown Arryns and begin their charm assault. Well, he was obviously useless for such endeavors so he must be left to his own devices. He wiped his mouth with his handkerchief before folding it and stuffing it down a pocket and stood to go where Robert was excitedly waving for him.

"Stannis! Stannis, explain this to us!"

Robert and a good number of other lords were standing around and looking at the Florent wheelhouses.

"The Florents are here, somewhere," Stannis replied.

"Oh, no, Stannis! Not the Florents. They get so wordy!"

Stannis sniffed.

"Well, then. What aspects do you wish to understand?"

"The name of the wheelhouse maker, to start!" Lord Mace had a most covetous look on his face.

Stannis readily wrote the information down and tore off a blank page off his notebook for Lord Mace. More cash flow for the Florent coffers. Excellent.

“These structures here,” Stannis indicated the leaf springs. “Allow for the box of the wheelhouse to bounce, more or less, over obstacles without shattering the teeth of the occupants.”

“And the glass windows? One could say it’s terribly extravagant to risk shattering in a moving wheelhouse over rough roads,” said Lord Hoster Tully. “Why, I’ve never seen clear panes as large as this anywhere!”

And that made Lord Mace very green about the gills indeed; just how rich are the Florents!?

“It would be, if it was Myrish glass,” Stannis tapped the glass with a finger. “But it is Westerosi glass. No import tax, docking fees, or any such costs associated with it.”

Gasps resulted from this revelation.

“Are the rumors true? Have we succeeded in stealing glassmaking secrets from Myr?” somebody called out.

“Are we to be besieged by Faceless Men for this!?” somebody else cried out.

Robert chuckled at the very disdainful sneer on Stannis’ face from this piece of nonsense.

“There was no theft involved. Nobody is going to be assassinated by Faceless Men.”

“Then how was it done?”

“Why would I tell anybody? I, myself, don’t want to be assassinated by Westerosi glassmakers guilds,” Stannis flatly replied. “Obviously.”

Robert laughed and the others laughed in echo, since the King seemed to think his brother was joking.

He fielded more questions regarding the improved harness and tack of the horses and just how comfortable it was to ride within the wheelhouses. Stannis waved down Erren, who of course grasped the benefits of practical demonstration and soon enough, parties of lords and ladies were allowed to take ten minute circuits inside the Florent wheelhouses. They were so impressed that it was clear that certain tradesmen beholden to Florent funding would be feeding themselves very well in the coming moons and years, indeed. If managed well, there was the makings of a new factory in this.

The talk soon settled on horses, horse breeding, horse racing, and horsemanship. Stannis did not much care about horses. He looked up and noticed that Selyse was still at work on the Gulltown Arryns. He could not go to her. He remained standing next to Robert, not saying much. He’s used to that, at least.

Now that he’s older and had Selyse’s perspective, he could see that Robert does try to include him, in his way. He’d ask ridiculous questions in jest with easy, obvious answers or simply

make completely incorrect statements and when Stannis can't help himself and answer in a snippy manner, Robert was so amused that it fuels more japing about Stannis needing to be correct, Stannis not allowing for leeway, Stannis, so serious! Stannis used to take it as at his expense. Selyse revealed that it's more what her world called making him the Straight Man, a particular role in her world's mummery and comedic stylings. Stannis played along this time instead of stomping off in a fit of ill temper, keeping his mouth wry, his eyebrow quirked, and occasionally timing an eyeroll well and before long Robert was grasping him on the arm, roaring with laughter after Stannis was made to paraphrase the more colorful of terms he's overhead from the Florents with his usual flat tone.

The surrounding lords laugh also, though Stannis can tell that not all of them comprehend exactly what is so funny, especially those who are not regulars at court, unused to the creative (and otherworldly) facility that the Florents have with their words.

Stannis had noticed after his accidental high mockery of that Rambton knight that the other men were somehow admiring of him, outside of standing next to Robert and the youths who were told to make themselves known to Renly by their wiser lord fathers. He could not understand it. Robert himself had advised him on technique (though he flattered himself in knowing that he could please Selyse best after all) and surely there was no great mystery on how to engage in mutual satisfaction during intercourse. But apparently, there was and apparently, he won a joust of words he had not known he was even in.

You catch more flies with honey instead of vinegar, Selyse said. Welcome to my parlor, said the spider to the fly, Imry said. Motherfucking White Walkers on this motherfucking planet.

Stannis remained where he was and used Robert to charm these assembled lords further. He could not do it himself. Robert might as well be useful to the cause.

King's Landing: Lost and Found

Tyrion, Kevan, and Gerion Lannister followed Lord Tywin as they walked a distance away from the pavilions proper, to where they could observe the Royal Shipyard. Tyrion thought it a sorry thing that Uncle Tygett could not be here with them to see this, but then again, he was recovering from the pox. It was most fortunate that Tyrion was able to convince Maester Creylan to pay attention to the medical treatises released by Bellflower Press and to institute rounds of inoculations at Casterly Rock. Uncle Tygett would be pox scarred, yes, but he would live. Maester Creylan had been most resistant at first, but the growing notoriety of Maester Bryan of Brightwater Keep was not to be ignored, to say nothing of the survivors of this last outbreak of pox within the Rock. Usually pox ravaged uncontrolled through the tunnels, only stopped by the Lannisters barring the way into the upper levels and hunkering down as if during a siege, eating and drinking stores of food for the purpose in isolation.

“How did the Florents do it?” Tywin finally asked. “Tyrion.”

“Years of coordinated engineering experimentation,” Tyrion promptly replied. “I recall that you said that there was a model ship that the Florents showed to the Ironmen lords.”

“The model is but a hint of the full effect of that finished ship,” Tywin indicated the Acclaim with a gesture. “It is also entirely unlike any other ship we have ever seen, except perhaps the Summer Islands swan ships. And yet, it is better. Clearly.”

“They might have stolen one such ship to take apart and examine, but that really is not how the Florents prefer to work,” Tyrion replied. “Father, one of them can be judged a true mathematical genius. If she were allowed into the Citadel itself, I have no doubt that Lady Rhea Royce could earn the highest amounts of links for Mathematics possible. She has the capability to be an Archmaester. The Florents have readily told me that she did the calculations regarding the hull shape, expected displacement, and how many and how large the sails should be, given how tall and strong the masts they could put on the ship. Between her and the teams of engineering scholars they have access to from Oldtown, it was only a matter of time.”

Tywin stood with his hands clasped behind his back as he gazed on the Acclaim.

“Would I be incorrect in assuming that it is not the glassmakers guilds of the Vale that discovered how to make panes of glass bigger, smoother, and clearer than those that can be bought from Myr?”

“Florents again,” Tyrion confirmed.

“Which one?”

“I do not know, father. As this is not a purely mathematical question depending on Rhea’s talents, but chemistry, any number of them would have worked as a team.”

“Would you be able to determine the secret?”

Tyrion gulped. Gerion's brow creased, worried on his nephew's behalf. Kevan just looked uncomfortable.

"I think I can," Tyrion crossed his arms. "If they figured it out, somebody else could figure it out. It just needs time and money. Get a number of different panes of glass, and start melting or grinding them down to find out if there's something different about the glass itself or questioning glassmakers to know the traditional methods so far in order to find out if it's something different about the manufacturing technique."

Tyrion waited. If his father wanted him to reverse engineer glassmaking, he'd do it, but it certainly was going to be lower priority than the drains, plumbing, and cisterns issue that his father already assigned him. He intended to finish something, at least!

"There is a reason that the Florents are... working these wonders. Do you know what it is?"

"Not explicitly discussed. But I am beginning to see the signs of a plan," Tyrion said.

"Explain."

"No matter how well ships may be built, the fact is that pirates and foul storms may destroy them. And yet, the risk is worth it because of the demand for Essosi goods. The Florents are dividing their energies. One method is to build the fastest trading ships as possible. The other is to find out ways to copy Essosi goods within Westeros itself. Made in Westeros. Bought and sold in Westeros. Not having to worry about profits sinking into the sea or taken by pirates on the passage over."

His uncles nodded in understanding.

"Alekyne has mentioned that he sees no reason Westeros could not produce such goods. We are not plagued by Dothraki hordes killing off workers, nor do we have constant wars like for the Disputed Lands, which again, kills off laborers fit for farming and industry."

"First Myrish glass," Uncle Gerion murmured. "Then... Myrish lace? Carpets?"

Tyrion thought back to the time he had witnessed the Florents designing the spinning frame and the flying shuttle.

"Yes," Tyrion nodded. "Do not be surprised if the Reach, Vale, or Stormlands starts producing bolts of lace or carpets. I would predict lace from the Reach and carpets from the Stormlands. Obviously the warmest wool comes from the North, but it's slow going yet. They have cause to be optimistic about access, though."

Of course. It is not unnoticed how various Florents have been circling around Benjen Stark and the Manderlys.

"We have long known how... industrious," Tywin's lip curled. "These Florents are. And it is good that you are beginning to understand their reasoning. And yet."

Tyrion sighed to himself. His father was right to have suspicions regarding the easiest explanations. He couldn't reveal how the Florents have shown in multiple ways that of course

they chased after profit, but overall, they cared about the smallfolk at the same time. Unlike Aegon V, they planned to improve smallfolk lives materially such that they are more satisfied in ways that do not upend the power of the lords the way a royal decree would. Happy, industrious, healthy people. No starving in the streets begging, no need to rely on alms handed out at septs. Which meant no more peasant uprisings, of course. Best deflect.

“Well, Father, if you really must know about what the Florents say, you must brace yourself for some very rude and disrespectful thoughts,” he said lightly.

As expected, Tywin turned fully to face him, looming, eyes sharp with the idea of being opposed. Mocked.

“Speak.”

“The Reynes and Tarbecks were a... circus of bad ideas, run by clowns, morons, idiots, and fuckshit stupid gamblers of sub-optimal intelligence. Father.”

Uncle Gerion made an explosive sound of hilarity from his nose. Uncle Kevan gasped. Tywin blinked.

“They said what?”

“The Florents say that really, it was very stupid of the Reynes. As far as the Florents can tell, the Reynes were gambling on all descendents of Tytos to be as lenient. Which, as everybody knows now, is false. They said that it was logically impossible that House Lannister wasn't going to be... ripshit stomp on balls brassed off enough to start planning ultra-murder. The Florents say it never does well to forget that we were proper Kings, once, with all the proper appetite for war and destruction that goes with it. The Florents are entirely uninterested in having their faces smashed so hard that their brains explode out the backs of their skulls. They'll leave that for the likes of the Reynes and Tarbecks.”

“Brains exploding out-” Gerion gasped, and was forced to lean on Kevan, shaking from another round of squawking laughter. Kevan patted his back.

Tywin's lips thinned. There was a miniscule glint of amusement in his eyes, but only just.

“So in conclusion, Lord Mace Tyrell may be a fool ripe for working over by certain persons crafty enough, but they will not, because Willas may be a cripple, but he does have some very formidable brothers who are not similarly crippled and are capable of ultra-murder in his name, following his orders. Probably. They don't intend to find out.”

Tyrion held up a finger, hoping to forestall Tywin, as he was not done and enjoying how his Uncles were turning colors with his recitation of Florent profanity.

“Just because they aren't a bunch of stupid motherfuckers looking to get obliterated by face-stabbing, does not mean that they aren't trying to rise in the world. They do not intend to copy the dumbshit methods of the Reynes and Tarbecks. We Lannisters have gold mines. The Reynes had gold mines. The Reynes thought... to steal the gold out of our mines by

borrowing more and more, never paying it back, while laughing at our House. That's just asking for limb-severing violence.

In the Reach, everything the Tyrells have, the Florents have too. Fields of wheat, rye, barley, gardens, orchards, pastures of livestock, a perfectly acceptable river that yields fish and allows for trade ferries. They even have access to the sea. Are they going to play dumb games with the Tyrells over agricultural products? As any of the Florent men will say, fuck, no. They are not about to go to war over cheese and ham. What the Florents looked for was how to rise higher by finding what Tyrells definitely don't have and cannot begin to have. Which necessitates good ideas. Creative ideas. Profitable ideas. Such as choosing to uncover the manufacturing techniques of Essos."

"And when the Free Cities inevitably take offense?"

"Royal Fleet Marines need to be blooded. And the Iron Islands Trading Company crews are manned by axe-crazy Ironmen who are probably very happy to be sanctioned to kill any Essosi 'pirates' hired on by jealous Essosi nobles or merchants who try for subtler methods of conflict. Of course, if it comes down to needing to transport goods over land in order to thwart Essosi, that's where both improving the roads and wheelhouses come in. What works on wheelhouses obviously will also work on merchants' wagons."

"It is still all mere industry and trade," Tywin shakes his head. "I do not trust that it is the whole of their desires."

Tyrion rubbed his moustache.

"Father, they are entirely aware of their less than impressive numbers of men-at-arms compared to the Tyrells, Hightowers, and Redwynes. They certainly do not want to risk internecine conflict within the Reach. It is well that the Tyrells have no place in court, as the Baratheons will have nothing to do with them. For this generation, probably the next, and longer, depending on whether or not Lord Stannis teaches his children to think the same. From that, yes, they are positioned well in the future for possibly a seat on the Small Council, more advantageous marriages, more power. But not today."

And they know it, was left unsaid. Tywin could not fault their caution.

It would not be out of the question for Lord Alester to be waiting on his grandchildren, to marry more Florents into the royal line. If the heir Alekyne did his duty and set about siring a good amount of offspring. Should Lord Stannis father a daughter, it would not be out of the question for that potential girl to be betrothed to a Florent cousin. From that, any number of opportunities become available to the Florents by marriage. A gamble. But it seems that the Florents were the sort to be patient.

They warned him about the attack on Lannisport. They negotiated such that he had new iron mines under his power in the Iron Islands. They alerted him to the opportunity to invest in the Iron Islands Trading Company. And they have befriended Tyrion. And made him... less of a blight on the family name. Servants of the Rock and Maester Creflen have been very clear that Tyrion spent his days out of sight in his lab. Tywin was no fool; the Florents must wish to make him favorably inclined towards them and to gain good debt from him.

They clearly feared him as well, as was proper, no matter that they would describe such fears about the consequences of inciting his anger in such blithely vulgar terms. He thought them too apt to laugh foolishly about such serious matters.

“They may play their eccentric little games with the Tyrells,” Tywin finally said. “I certainly see no reason to warn the Tyrells about those particularly ambitious bannermen of theirs.”

Nobody came to aid him when it came time to put down the Reynes and Tarbecks. Not the Crown, not anybody. Granted, Tywin would not have tolerated any assistance from outsiders; it was a challenge that only his House could answer. If you needed help from outsiders against usurpers, then you were weak. He was not weak. If House Tyrell could not handle their business, it is simply their weakness and he would waste no time nor money on Reach internal matters.

“It will be amusing to watch as the years go by,” Gerion quipped.

“You have been invited into their King’s Landing manse?” Tywin asked Tyrion.

“Yes. I will be delivering the clocks that they have ordered and we will be going over some design ideas I’ve had about the plumbing situation at Casterly Rock.”

“Clocks.”

“I think I shall try to get a deal on glass panels for the clock face covers,” Tyrion went on, choosing to ignore the derisive tone of his father. “Keep the dust out of the gearing.”

“Will you be wanting to set up a guild and workshops for your devices?” Uncle Gerion kindly asked.

“Well, I want to,” Tyrion said. “The Florents say Casterly Rock’s jewellers are the best, of course, and so it shouldn’t be any trouble at all to have journeyman smiths used to working with fine metals to work on clocks. If enough clocks are seen in court, the other nobles are very likely to want to own them themselves and then-”

Tyrion nodded to himself.

“A fashionable exportable commodity to Essos.”

“And it’s your idea, isn’t it? Not the Florents?” Gerion helpfully asked.

“Yes,” Tyrion smiled with appreciation at his uncle. “Definitely all mine. The Florents are very interested in my work.”

“Interested enough to get some clocks and then to copy them for their own profit?” Tywin interjected.

While Gerion pursed his lips at his older brother, Tyrion shook his head.

“Father, if they did do such a foolish thing, they’d be stealing a Lannister’s idea. Brains exploding out the backs of their skulls, remember? Not interested.”

“Well, I think it’s a splendid venture,” Gerion declared. “Show the rest of the court that it’s not just Florents who can come up with good ideas.”

Tywin glanced at Kevan, who cautiously nodded.

“You may begin on establishing a new guild and workshops. After you complete your first duty to Casterly Rock.”

“Thank you, Father,” Tyrion bowed.

The crowd dispersed after the late lunch and everybody made their way back to King’s Landing. Tyrion was very glad indeed to join up with the Florent party. Uncle Gerion followed along, ostensibly to look after him, but really, any excuse to spend less time around Tywin is good enough.

Tyrion rode in the wheelhouse with Lady Selyse and Lady Samantha. They spent the ride over discussing his newly sanctioned guild establishment and Lady Selyse most generously said that of course he will be gifted books on the establishment of factory works, as the Florents have done so already for their wool and cotton, and tin jarring interests, with sound business principles such as an assembly line and quality control, and of course, double entry bookkeeping so that he could show that this is not just some dilettante hobby of his to his father.

Tyrion decided to warn Lady Selyse that they have gained the interest of his father. She nodded seriously and said that can only be expected.

“I suppose he would not be so worried if Queen Cersei was any good at diplomacy and truly cared about working for the greater good of House Lannister.”

Tyrion didn’t hide his confusion; Cersei has always been very proud about being a Lannister. They all are.

“There are very selfish people in this world,” Selyse said in the tone of a wise woman from a story. “Who would wreak havoc if only to see to their own desires obtained above all else. You must be very careful around a person such as her.”

Well, he knew that. She hated him, after all. He didn’t forget how she used to pull his hair or shoved him, or took his toys from him and held them out of reach over his head, cackling meanly while the servants looked the other way when he wept and begged her to stop as a child, because she was favored, Jaime was favored, but he wasn’t.

It only made him think about how not only does Selyse have two fierce protectors in the form of her brothers, but in her cousins. How all they spend time together, how the volume of letters he received from them must be a pale reflection of how often they correspond with each other. How they were all fervent supporters of each other, not just in the way Uncle Kevan is subject to Father.

When they arrived at the Foxhole, Tyrion thought that the simplicity and unassuming looks of the place was charming in an old-fashioned and rustic manner, despite it being in the middle

of bustling King's Landing.

The workshop wing of the Foxhole was wondrous. Multiple scholars, discernable by smart lab coats that came to their calves with the modern cut favored by the Florents in traditional maester gray and wearing their earned links pinned to the breast pockets of the coats, were at work. He courteously agreed that he did not need to see deeply into the lab; it was enough to see that there were multiple rooms and multiple projects going at once. The Florents have put in enough orders of his clocks such that there was one in each floor of the workshop wing, one in Alekyne's solar, one in Lady Samantha's chambers, and one in Lord and Lady Baratheon's chambers. He's shipped off another pair of clocks for Erren on Dragonstone and he's going to finalize designs for more elaborate clocks for Lord Baratheon's office in the Red Keep and one for King Robert.

The Florents favored utility instead of ostentatious ornamentation, so the clocks they commissioned were in tall polished wood columnar cases, with the hours, minutes, and second hands all together on one face, unlike his very first clock. The woodworking artisans of Lannisport were quite aghast at the idea of simplicity (a gift from a son of Lord Lannister was to showcase their work! Surely Tyrion was joking about preferring the gifts to be simple!) and the clock cases had scrollwork, fluting, chamfered corners, and little pawed feet. Secured on the tops of each clock were wooden statues of foxes in different poses depending on the taste of the particular woodworker to individualize each clock. Selyse was charmed by one clock that had one fox that seemed to be sleeping, draped languidly over the top of the clock, its bushy tail curled to frame one side of the clock face. He had a lot of fun corresponding with Lady Selyse on the matter of designs.

Everybody crowded around the clocks and praised his cleverness. Tyrion felt very proud indeed and Uncle Gerion had to caution him against getting a puffed up head. He was able to sit down with Selyse and Stannis to go over the clock that would be in Stannis' office at the Red Keep. Stannis agreed that the top of the clock would be surmounted by a carved stag's head. A pair of six point antlers from one of Robert's hunts would be put to use for the decoration. The pendulum would be carved to seem like an anchor and the trim wood would be carved to look like rope and sailors knots. And finally, instead of pawed feet, the clock case would have cloven hooves.

It was Selyse's idea to start incorporating so called bells and whistles for King Robert's clock; why, she even came up with the idea of a little door popping open over the clock face, with a cunning little bird bowing and flapping its wings on the hour, while two whistles triggered to echo a cuckoo's call. Rustic. Charming!

He showed her his in-process sketches; that if one cuckoo was possible, surely there could be more for the clock to do, no matter that it would quite probably break down more often. She supposed that another mechanism used for the bobbing of the cuckoo could be reused for the effect of a leaping stag over the top of the clock. He liked that and wrote down Selyse and Delena's suggestions that the clock front could be decorated with properly woodsy motifs such as carved and painted branches with oak leaves, birds, and squirrels. He already liked the idea of the clock weights being shaped like pine cones and the pendulum shaped to be like a maple leaf. Selyse had also joked to him to keep a light touch on any use of gilding for the clock; Lannisters did like smearing gold all over everything so very much.

This was definitely more fun than his sketches and thoughts on a jake that could be flushed with water. He would do that in the coming days of his stay. He had originally thought on getting the manual on how to produce and harness gas from biodigesters, but the layout of the Rock itself made it impossible. There were no truly quick ways to transport the waste outdoors; that was why so many tunnels and chutes existed solely for dumping the waste out into the sea.

Dinner was most convivial. Uncle Gerion was very happy indeed to sit with him and sample the simpler fare of their table compared to the richly sauced and exotic meats favored by Casterly Rock. Some of the rumored austerity of Lord Stannis must be an influence. Tyrion enjoyed the cheesy garlic bread debuted from Selyse and Stannis' wedding. A buttered white fish with capers and lemon sauce and a braised beef stew made with red wine was a revelation. Uncle Gerion muttered to Tyrion to make a note to ask for the recipes.

After dinner, they could enjoy the musical stylings of the Florents at large, play table games, or simply disperse to the various smaller sitting rooms to read. Imry made a furtive beckoning gesture and Tyrion saw that Uncle Gerion was distracted enough about learning the rules of Mere that he could slip away without notice.

Imry led him alone to a chamber fitted out to be suitable for reading, with padded chairs and little side tables for holding trays of snacks and drinks. Tyrion took a seat and observed Imry. He had become restive and almost twitchy, which was very unlike Imry at all.

"This is very odd," Imry said abruptly. "I'm feeling very nervous. I cannot predict how you will react, you see."

"You have a surprise for me," Tyrion guessed.

"I do."

"Is it very likely that I won't like it?" Tyrion tilted his head.

Imry shrugged.

"First of all," Imry said. "It regards secrets. Lannister secrets."

Tyrion frowned at that.

"Ah. Is this related to your letters regarding efforts at figuring out the weave of Lord Varys' webs? Have you found out things you ought not?"

Imry nodded. He leaned forward.

"I found a terrible story regarding you. But rumors being rumors, I set out to find out the truth of it myself."

"Terrible rumors are still rumors. Why concern yourself?" Tyrion clasped his hands, starting to feel a rising distrust that he disliked very much as it seemed to confirm his Father's scorn of the Florents.

“You are my friend,” Imry immediately replied. “I had to do something.”

“So you’ve done it, I take it,” Tyrion felt like he needed a drink.

Imry nodded.

“I did. I hope- I hope you will like it. Just wait here.”

Imry exited the room. Tyrion sat and waited.

The door opened and the figure of a woman entered. She was dressed in the sober and practical manner of the Florent servants; factory-woven white cotton for the blouse and dark blue for the skirt, with a starched white apron and cap covering her hair.

“My lord husband.”

“Tysha!”

He gasped for breath, his heart hammering.

“Tyrion?” she held out a hand. “Will you not greet me?”

Tyrion squinched his eyes shut. Tysha said nothing further and the silence stretched.

“I-” and he rubbed at the tears coming from his eyes. “I-”

Tysha stepped closer and drew out a handkerchief and hesitantly held it out to him.

“I don’t know what to say,” Tyrion took the handkerchief. “Tysha.”

“I still love you-”

“I’m sorry-”

They paused, stymied by what they were both about to say. Tyrion took a deep breath.

“I am sorry,” he said. “About the raping. About being such a fool and too useless to stop it.”

Tysha blinked, her own tears forming.

“I still love you,” Tysha said. “T’weren’t your fault. You were always good to me. It was Lord Lannister who ordered it and I know how it be.”

Tyrion nodded. He wiped at his eyes again and looked at her. How healthy and well she looked!

“I am glad that you are well,” Tyrion rallied. “And found employment with the Florents at that.”

Tysha dipped her head in agreement.

“But, my lord- Will you not say that you love me too? Or have you forgotten me?”

“I never forgot you!” Tyrion cried, resisting the urge to reach out for her. “I couldn’t! It’s just-”

“I said I forgave you.”

“I’m not to see you again,” Tyrion recited. “Because you are a whore.”

He looked down, too weak to bear witness to her disappointment and justified anger.

“That was a lie,” Tysha very firmly declared. “‘T’ was your own father that did it. There are still folk at The Village By the Bridge, that will swear on the Seven that I’m Tysha, daughter of Denys, son of Walder, son of Rolder, farmers all. I was no whore until your father ordered me raped into one!”

Tyrion’s mouth fell open as he looked up at her again. Tysha’s fists clenched as she continued.

“If you will not see me again because I’ve been made a whore, that would be your right, my lord. T’is true, lords do not make wives of such women. But now you know the truth; I love you still and I came to you a maid on our wedding day, true as a wife could be until your father forced his will.”

They stared at each other until Tyrion jumped down from his chair, reaching to embrace her.

“I’m sorry!” he wept anew. “I’m sorry!”

Tysha nodded, weeping and kneeling to embrace him also. They stayed like that, crying tears at seeing each other again, of knowing the truth of what happened, of enduring such pain, of the unfairness of it all.

They managed to reaffirm to each other that they still loved each other despite what happened.

“What’s to become of you?” Tyrion said finally, suddenly afraid.

“Ser Imry says the Florents have ideas.”

Tyrion rushed for the door and opened it. Imry was leaning against the wall opposite. He raised his eyebrows hopefully upon seeing Tyrion. Tyrion wiped his eyes and smiled, holding Tysha’s hand.

“Excellent,” Imry clapped his hands once, grinning sharp. “Excellent.”

King's Landing: Step by step

Tyrion and Imry returned to the main hall, to make a show of wanting to retire for the evening. Uncle Gerion waved at them, being very involved in this round of Mere with Alekyne, Erren, and Omer. Imry caught Selyse's eye and tipped his head for a moment. She nodded and after Tyrion and Imry left, closed her notebook and began readying herself to retire for the night. Stannis followed her not long after.

Imry told Tyrion that they must wait until Uncle Gerion confirmed that he is abed, so Tyrion might as well go to sleep; they will wake him later that night after everybody else has also. Right before Imry turned to take his leave, Tyrion grasped his hand.

"Imry. Imry, my friend. I am deeply, deeply in your debt."

"I didn't do it so that I would have a Lannister in my debt," Imry replied forthrightly.

"Still. I shan't forget."

Imry squeezed his hand before letting go and leaving. Tyrion couldn't possibly sleep. It's all too amazing. He concentrated on the rising happiness of finding Tysha well, for if he thought on his father, an equally growing swell of rage threatened to engulf him.

Why?

Oh, he knew, the Florents did not even have to hint in their careful and yet casual way that Lord Tywin hated his own son. All he had to do was watch the way the Florents acted with each other and he knew; the difference was too great to not be true. Just because he was a dwarf.

But there was something else and his mind gnawed on it, gnawed on how it must be his father who made Jaime lie to him. Forcing Jaime to forswear himself, until he was used to it, used to chipping away at his own honor until he was a White Cloak and then a Kingslayer, and kept silent about his reasons because that's what Father did; twist things, break things, hurt people. Jaime became a liar because what Father wanted and what Jaime wanted were almost never the same things, not really, and Jaime doesn't think!

Maybe, Tyrion thought, he meant to drive Jaime and I apart. Jaime loves me out of our generation of the Rock. Oh, Aunt Genna is fond, but she's only able to do so much. And Uncle Gerion loves me, I think, but nobody cares what he thinks and he knows it; that's why he drinks. Uncle Tygett doesn't even know what to say to me. And forget Uncle Kevan. He's like to want Cousin Lancel to be heir to the Rock. It would be the sensible thing to be ambitious about. Tyrion couldn't blame him, but it certainly made for a wall between him and Uncle Kevan.

Father never wants me to have anything good, Tyrion thought. I am to serve and be useful and out of the way and out of sight, but the minute I am happy, he will interfere.

I don't know what to do with these facts, Tyrion concluded.

I must wait on Florent thoughts and ideas. They'll have suggestions and there's no saying that I must do as they suggest. They weren't like Father.

He took off his jacket, shirt and shoes, put on his nightshirt over his trousers and climbed into bed. When Imry was ready for him, he'll just slip on his pair of house slippers and his jacket over his nightshirt. He snuffed out the bedside candle, and laid his head on the pillow. There. He did hope everybody else goes to sleep at a reasonable time.

His manservant said nothing about Tyrion stuffing his jacket underneath his pillow or the missing trousers while picking up the rest of the clothes, stoking the fire in the hearth, and finally, leaving.

He managed to drowse off when a brisk tapping at the door roused him. He was quickly ready and trotted after Imry in a trice. They passed using servants' halls and then they were inside one of the offices within the workshop wing of the Foxhole.

Tysa was there, and Tyrion went to her. Simply sitting next to her, holding her hand, was the best feeling. Opposite, similarly seated and holding hands, was Lord and Lady Baratheon. Imry took a seat also.

"I believe Tysa should speak first, as Tyrion must be wanting to know about her last whereabouts," Imry suggested.

Tysa nodded and Tyrion prepared himself for the tale. She recounted how she had lain still, not knowing what else to do in the grip of fear and pain afterwards. She was frightened by the possibility that any of the Lannister soldiers would come back or the Lord would come back and finish his punishment upon her by ordering her death. She stayed until she could hear no sound and only then did she move.

She stacked and rolled the silvers and the gold coin, the greatest amount of money she had ever seen in her life, into a roll of cloth that she cut from the sheets and tied them about her waist underneath her dress, gathered up the remaining food, and fled.

She did not wander aimlessly. Luckily the cottage was close enough to The Village By the Bridge, where her father's folk came from before he was assigned a new croft by Casterly Rock's Head Stewart. She made her way there, hiding in the hedges, ducking out of sight of all persons; she had already been chased by bandits in the first place and she had thought that would be the worst of it. She knew better, now.

"So you think you can use your lowborn cunt to catch a lion, do you," Lord Tywin's voice was dire and terrible that day. "A Lannister of the Rock!"

She'd begged. She wept and tried to explain.

She had no idea what was wrong with being with Tyrion, she had thought that if it were wrong, the septon would have stopped them, or Tyrion would not have asked, or his older

brother, that shining knight Ser Jaime, who was older and must have known such things, he would have told Tyrion not to.

She had trusted older people to know such things all her young life.

A Lannisport minstrel passing through her father's village had sung of Jenny of Oldstones and taught her how to sing Seasons of My Love. A Prince could love a peasant girl and it made the women at the harvest festival all sigh. Tysha had been enchanted by the thought, as girls do, and thought it simply was a truth. One was vanishingly unlikely to meet a prince, but if it weren't true, they wouldn't make songs of it, surely?

But she had not understood that whatever was so with one Targaryen prince, was definitely not so with Tyrion Lannister; his father was Lord Tywin Lannister and the one song about him told of naught but death and destruction.

So he hurt her and she was not so far gone with terror to not notice how he stared at Tyrion with that same hateful loathing in his eyes, that same wish to destroy. And Tyrion, poor Tyrion, gone pale and trembling while his father hissed something low and terrible into his ear before forcing a gold coin into his hand.

Tysha learned to hate in that moment; banish her, take Tyrion away, even flog her for reaching so high, and she would be silent and obey, but to do this, to make Tyrion hurt her last was monstrous.

Tyrion wasn't the monster rumored by others. It was his father.

Everything ended as abruptly as it started and Tysha had only this thought: Please don't kill me after, please don't kill me, don't kill me-

She was lucky for that.

She waited by the river, until the local washerwoman arrived one morning to beat and wash laundry against the rocks, and approached her. She exchanged words, letting it be known that she was family to locals and asked after any of her father's kin.

The washerwoman shook her head; the usual sicknesses took their toll and there were none of her father's kin alive. However, the washerwoman did believe that she was the daughter of Denys, son of Walder, son of Rolder. Tysha could not remain with the washerwoman for long, though the woman was kind enough to invite her to her own dwelling and to have bread with her. The washerwoman had little enough work to be getting by with; washing the clothes of unmarried farm laborers who had no womenfolk of their own to do such work.

Tysha gamely tried to let her know of all her skills; she could gut game and fish, she could mend and sew, cook and clean, she could weave baskets. The washerwoman shook her head, not wanting to discourage her but needing to, just the same. However, the kind hearted soul would not have Tysha turned outdoors without a place to lay her head.

It was no trouble at all to get thread and to cut a rod from a tree and to fashion a fish hook from bone. When the washerwoman washed by the river, Tysha kept her company, fishing. In

exchange for sharing her catches, Tysha could live with her, and sing the pretty songs she knew in exchange for as long as she needed. Who knows, the washerwoman practically supposed; perhaps another sickness would come and they'll be needing extra hands in the fields for harvesting and threshing.

She lived simply for a time, familiar like her life before with her father, until Ser Imry rode into the village. She had been sorely afraid once it was known that a stranger was asking after her, and hid. But Imry was very good at seeming harmless with his mummer's garb. He sang to the villagers and even did some odd jobs to help build trust, until he managed to meet her by the river. He carefully asked about her past until it was clear that she was the one he was looking for; the girl who was savaged by Lannister soldiers in a cottage near the sea.

He was so soft and careful, speaking low and moving slow and with an expression of such sympathy that Tysha unburdened herself.

He had very simply asked her if she had it in her heart to see Tyrion ever again; he would understand if after what Lord Lannister had done, she would not. If she was satisfied with her lot, she could stay in the village.

She was afraid, of course. But Imry said very clearly that as he was a knight, he would do what he could to right this wrong, this terrible injustice done against her. She believed him, yet still feared. She was given the chance to leave Lord Lannister's land entirely, to go with him into the Reach, where there was safety within his family's holdings.

She was no longer an innocent, not after what happened to her. Perhaps he was a liar about being a Ser as well, and was some kind of procurer, out to spirit young women away and pressing them into service as whores at some far away brothel. Maybe he was Lord Lannister's hired man, after all, like to slit her throat in the night. But she was young, hurt, and with no prospects in this nameless village. She agreed and rode off with him on his mule.

They journeyed together and Ser Imry proved his word; he was kind to her and certainly did not attack her in the night. Along the way, he even took out the last proper letter he had received from Tyrion and read it to her. The turns of phrase and the big words used were so like Tyrion that she wept at this fleeting presence of her lost husband. She played along with Ser Imry's mumming act, quickly learning how to keep a beat on the drum and singing duets with him to earn coppers along the way. He took out some ribbons from his saddle bags to give to her so she could braid them into her hair and tied some bows on her arms to better match the ribbons on his own sleeves. In this way, they made their way to Brightwater Keep at last.

Ser Imry apprised his uncle, Lord Florent (how she trembled when she found out that she was to face yet another lord!) and Lady Florent about her circumstances. They were not cold, stern, or frightening at all. The Lord merely looked her in the eye and said that he was very sorry about her misfortunes. The Lady was very kind and took her hand, saying the same. They got her a chamber of her own in the guest quarters, with such things as a feather bed and pillows, with fine tapestries on the walls and her own hearth fire!

In the meantime, Ser Imry wrote to his sister, Lady Selyse. The beginnings of a plan were set to work. They could not let Tyrion know yet. But, she was safe so long as she remained

hidden within Florent holdings.

Tysha was told that Lady Florent would claim her as kin, an Oldflowers.

She would be known as Tysha Oldflowers in Lady Florent's household, a foster to be educated amongst young lordlings and ladies. She was shocked by the idea of it, surely such a lie would be found out! Didn't the Maesters keep records with their writings and such?

Lady Florent smiled encouragingly and Lord Florent smiled cannily. There were maesters and then there were maesters. House Oldflowers was not so grand that it was unusual for a knightly son to strike out on their own in search of service and a living and getting married far away without informing the main branch until after the fact.

And for that, the last War of the Ninepenny Kings was very useful; so many men had been sent off and enough never came back. It would be absolutely no trouble at all to claim that she was a daughter of one of them.

She was afraid that she could not muddle her way through this, no matter that she traveled with Ser Imry and marveled at how he could change his walk, his talk, the way he stood, to fool others. Lady Florent had firmly informed her that she had no choice. For ill or nil, she was wed to a young lord, a scion of a Great House and if the Florents could craft a new path for her to gain her place beside Tyrion should he have her, she would need to be a proper lady.

Tysha thought on the matter for a week and decided that she was afraid of getting caught out, but nothing could be worse than how she was treated as a commoner anyhow, so why not? What worse could happen to her? Death? She was no longer afraid of that.

If, if Tyrion loved her still, then that was enough. It was enough before she knew his place in the world as a Lannister of the Rock. It would be enough now that she knew better.

She agreed to go along with the Florents with her plan.

So she was bathed, her nails trimmed, her hair brushed and braided, and new clothes made for her. Her silvers and gold coin were gathered and Lady Florent kindly explained the idea of investment for Tysha. Tysha was loathe to part with the gold coin, as painful as it was, for it was the last thing of Tyrion she had. It didn't matter; the Florents were so generous that they had it turned into a pendant for a necklace. They had a goldsmith wrought a cunning little hinge and lid for it, worked to look like a flowery locket over one face and she could swing the locket open and see that coin entire, when she wasn't wearing it hidden under her dress. The rest of the silver and another gold coin from the Florents were invested into their works, with the percent of shares in their profits in writing. She could not properly sign her name yet, and so had to mark with an x and pressing down an ink thumbprint.

While the other fosters were at their daily lessons with the Maester, Lady Florent herself taught Tysha how to read and write. When the other foster girls were at sewing or music lessons, Lady Florent took her around Brightwater Keep, to explain the duties of being a lady and practice at comportment and etiquette at a lord's table. It all seemed more than she was capable of, but Lady Florent assured her that plenty of lords and ladies were barely better at

their letters than her, as strange a thought as that was, depending on their Maesters. She worked especially hard to mimic the noble accent of the Florents.

They were all waiting for a chance to reunite her with Tyrion and to find out what his response was. The chance finally came and they disguised her yet again in servants' garb to hide her in plain sight within the Foxhole, while still maintaining her education. Should he reject her, her education with the Florents would have made her a bride suitable for another minor landed knight's House, no matter that she was no longer a maid. Or, she could continue to live unmarried with the Florents, finding some suiting occupation from her education.

"I lost you once, I will not again," Tyrion fiercely declared.

"She is not safe," Lord Baratheon finally spoke and Tysha shivered at the growl of his voice, the frown on his face, an echo of Lord Lannister's menace. "While Lord Tywin lives."

"Well. There are many easy solutions to that problem," Imry lightly replied, to Tysha's gasp.

He noticed Tyrion's frown.

"Ah, I can't joke about how your father has it coming to him, as Erren would say?"

"There's a reason he's not included in this meeting," Selyse wryly sighed. "Erren is excitable."

"I cannot even begin to consider what ought to be done about Father," Tyrion shook his head.

"How are you feeling, Tyrion?" Selyse gently asked. "About this? About your father? About Jaime?"

"Father made Jaime lie to me," Tyrion grimaced. "I'm sure of it. As for Father?"

He sighed and let go of Tysha's hand to rub his hand over his moustache.

"He didn't have to do what he did. It takes nothing but some gold to annul a marriage, especially as nobody else even knew! Just Jaime and I! I know it now. He did what he did to be cruel. He treated me, his son, as if I was a Reyne!"

"It is a misfortune when parents hate their children," Selyse commented.

"I think I always knew. But not- Not truly."

"Nobody ought to be treated so cruelly as how he treated you two," Selyse softly said.

Tyrion straightened in his seat. Tysha sniffled and straightened also.

"Imry mentions that you see yourself as in debt to him," Selyse continued.

"Not just him," Tyrion formally replied. "I would be honored and pleased as a Lannister to promise a favor to House Florent should House Florent be in need of a friend in times to come."

“Lord Florent will be apprised.”

“I am still not... Not entirely sure why you all have been so generous,” Tyrion said. “Imry hewing to justice notwithstanding.”

“Trust not in what one says, trust in what one does,” Stannis said. “House Florent plays at underhanded levity, but they believe in justice. They believe in friendship. They believe in you. By their efforts, they show their regard.”

Tyrion did not have to think overly long on the matter to agree. His Father was cruel in ways that preserved the Lannister dominance over the Westerlands. He did not need to turn on his own son in such a manner. Other disappointed parents could withhold love and regard without resorting to such measures. It wasn't fair. But it was true. And Tyrion was done with his father in that case.

“Well. I'm not a fool like Father thinks. I'll remember this. A Lannister always pays his debts and as he's said enough times, I am a Lannister; I ought to act like one!”

“First decide your goal,” Imry recited. “Then lay out the steps you must take to attain it.”

“Most important of all,” Tyrion looked at Tysha. “I want Tysha to be safe and well, and for us to be married, untroubled by others about such a thing.”

“Possible,” Selyse said. “But risky.”

“It must be done most carefully,” Imry added. “If we decide not to do anything about Lord Tywin.”

“There must always be a Warden of the West,” Stannis pointed out.

“Do you both understand how terribly vital it is that nobody sees the two of you together, that nobody suspects anything between the two of you?” Selyse addressed Tyrion and Tysha.

They both nodded hastily.

“How shall that be done for me?” Tysha asked. “Am I to go back to Brightwater Keep?”

“Do you wish to? You can be a lady-in-waiting to my mother or even me, if it suit you?”

Tysha considered her choices.

“I would learn more on how to be a Lady of a Great House, if I were to remain with Lady Florent,” Tysha thought out loud. “But I would learn fancier manners in court.”

“Queen Cersei is here. I would not rest easy in your circumstances being so near that woman,” Stannis gravely observed.

Tysha looked in question to Tyrion.

“My sweet sister was a most apt pupil of dear Father,” Tyrion snorted.

“Then she is cruel and dangerous,” Tysha realized. “And I cannot avoid her in court because the Florents go very often.”

“Are you prepared to be separated in this manner, with Tyrion at Casterly Rock and you at Brightwater Keep?”

“We must,” Tysha firmly said. “To keep both of us safe. ‘Tis as Tyrion says; his own lord father treated him like a Reyne and everybody knows what happened with them. I’ll not be cause for putting him in danger.”

“You will still be able to write letters, of course,” Imry said. “Though Tysha ought to direct the letters to the Foxhole and then we arrange for dead drops that Tyrion can reach.”

That made sense to Tyrion.

They worked out a plan to be expanded over time. Selyse reminded the both of them that they were both still young; she herself was not married until twenty-one. Tysha would need all the time possible for polishing and occasional appearances at court, to be seen with the Florents when Lord Florent had cause to visit King’s Landing. It was impossible that a peasant should be married to a Lannister. But a minor noble? Even from as small a House as Oldflowers? Not too impossible. Especially since Lord Tywin’s own sister was married to a Frey. Oldflowers could boast Gardener blood.

Tyrion himself needed to gain a bloc of support for himself within Casterly Rock. He had to expect that Lord Tywin would suffer it to go to one of his nephews. Working from this assumption, Tyrion had to maneuver himself in such a way that he would be allowed leeway from a notoriously controlling Lord Paramount, let alone a father. Selyse and Imry laid out the beginnings of a campaign to give his reputation and presence much needed luster.

It was true that as a dwarf, the traditional lordly pursuits (besides his early bouts of whoring and drinking after being punished for Tysha) were not going to be attainable.

Height had nothing to do with hawking, Stannis suggested. Here, he had more than enough expertise on the handling of raptors and would be willing to be seen escorting Tyrion through the King’s Wood for the purpose, with a party of suitably gossipy lords on sevendays when Tyrion had cause (and he would have plenty) to visit King’s Landing. Stannis and Lord Hand Arryn had agreed with Robert that as he was doing his duties so much more often that he ought to have one hunt a moon to relax. Robert was very enthusiastic about spending time with both of his brothers and Stannis found the benefits of what Selyse termed schmoozing in a setting less imposing than the Red Keep.

There was also the fact that the hunts, being so much more rare than rounds of Hammerball or soccer, were very exclusive. Robert himself saw the sense in a properly small hunting party that would not slow him down nor scare away the game for miles. The Florents were very happy to use the hunting parties as a way to test out war campaign gear. As far as Selyse was concerned, there was nothing that could not be made to fold out of a large trunk or otherwise made to quickly dismantle and stowed away. A camp bed with a padded mattress. A dispatch writing desk with compartments for papers and writing instruments. Washstands.

A larger table with legs that unscrewed and then the table top folded in half and became a box case that held the legs within. A brass candle lantern that folded flat into a rectangle.

Imry suggested that Tyrion may even be interested in the ongoing project of Alekyne's to improve bows and crossbows with cams. That would give him an excuse to visit the Foxhole more often and eventually allow him to be seen having some weapons handling ability to show for it.

Tyrion supposed that would be beneficial to show the gossipmongers at court that he was capable in a way.

Selyse had heard from her mother, who heard from her gossip sewing circles that included Crownlander and Westermen women that instead of a drunken, lustful monster, after his showing at the last feast, where he ably danced the foxtrot and did not over imbibe wine that he was starting to seem respectable.

He would need to concentrate on building up the business of his clockmaking endeavor, increasing volume and quality as he went, starting first at Lannisport and with the aim to set up shops in King's Landing. And with that, of course he would need to supervise at King's Landing. While there, he should get himself a manse in his name, with his own funds.

While at King's Landing, he would be seen with Alekyne and Renly; respectable heirs better known for being bookish and favoring indoor games and artistic pursuits when they weren't engaged in suitably martial activities. Even better, Renly was to be a Lord Paramount. It would even be an echo of Lord Tywin and Lord Steffon's friendship. They would see to gaining inroads with the Westerland bannermen Houses who had presence at King's Landing. It is here that they had to move most carefully; Cersei would be very dangerous indeed once it became clear to her that Tyrion would be issuing his own dinner and lunch invitations and afternoon amusements.

It would be no trouble at all to have Lady Lysa issue him an invitation to the smaller dinners within Lord Hand Arryn's chambers. Immediate inclusion in this very exclusive list of approved guests would do much for his reputation. There was also the fact that if he was the only Lannister who mattered with access to the Lord Hand, his father simply must take him into consideration.

Tyrion asked if Uncle Gerion could be included somehow in all this scheming. Of course, he would not know about Tysha. The matter was thought on and Imry suggested that as Tyrion would now be seen making regular trips to King's Landing that perhaps his uncle could be convinced to be a part of his retinue, as it was known that Gerion was often at cross purposes with his oldest brother.

Tyrion thought it would not be too difficult to accomplish.

He would miss Tysha dearly, but having work and amassing funds that he would not have to account for with his father suited him.

Tysha would continue her education and make visits to the Foxhole, where general exposure would allow her chances to perhaps contribute and increase her own funds. She was already

working as hard as possible to learn Reacher noble manners.

They would go on with their separation until Tyrion had enough independence and support from other nobles such that if he were to marry her publicly, they could stand as witnesses and he would be too valuable, too well known for Lord Tywin to make reprisal; he would risk losing too much in goodwill.

Satisfied and all of them yawning, they left to each of their own quarters. Imry kindly let Tyrion and Tysha have a moment alone together; for they surely could not be seen by even the Florent servants.

They embraced and kissed.

“I miss you already,” he sniffed. “But it will all be worth it, Tysha.”

“I know. You shall make everything well,” Tysha squeezed him tightly. “And when you next visit the Foxhole, I shall have some embroidered handkerchiefs for you, by my hand. I’m learning embroidery, you see.”

“I look forward to reading your letters,” Tyrion stepped back.

Tysha nodded, kissed him again, and they separated down the halls.

King's Landing: Bear with Me

Tyrrion and his retinue stayed on in King's Landing after the Ironmen lords took their leave, backtracking to Seaguard escorted by the Florent men-at-arms assigned by Imry. It was during this time that it was announced that Lord Alester Florent and Lord Jorah Mormont came to an accord and that Alekyne Florent and Dacey Mormont were officially betrothed.

The disparity in means and the lack of prior importance of the Mormonts in the doings of the royal court set tongues wagging. Most spurious was the rumor that Alekyne was caught in Dacey's bed and that Jorah demanded satisfaction on the matter of her honor. Some supposed that the lady in question was comely enough and that there was no reason it could not be a love match. Others claimed that the Mormonts held to some mysterious Northern custom, whereupon if a woman could best a man at arms, the man could be taken as spoils for a husband.

It was certainly true that Dacey was seen routing Alekyne in the Red Keep's training yard with rapid blows of her mace and a well-timed leg sweep. Bawdy jokes were made of the foolhardy fox making to mount such a fierce bear.

More was noted about how simply unfortunate it must be for Lord Alester to have made such prestigious matches for the womenfolk of his family and for his heir to let him down by choosing a lady of such a poor, out of the way House. Plenty watched, trying to discern any break in paternal regard from Lord Alester. Those who encountered him at any number of dinners and entertainments or court appearances could conclude nothing; Lord Alester showed naught but that infuriating, knowing, smirking smile that hinted at anything and nothing. Alekyne would only say that he was pleased by his betrothed, ignoring the more pointed questions posed by the other Reacher lordlings and knights at court.

Dacey would be staying on as a guest of the Manderlys in their King's Landing manse for propriety's sake. Out of all the Northern Houses the Manderlys had most cause to maintain a presence at King's Landing, where one or another cousin or trusted servant could keep abreast of Small Council doings, make note of trends in trade, and receive instructions regarding any potential House petitions of import great enough to require the attention of the King instead of Lord Stark, rare as those were.

Dacey Mormont had never been to King's Landing before. Nobody could recall a Mormont besides Lord Jorah venturing South, though surely his father and other Bear Islanders served during the War of the Ninepenny Kings. It was judged that of course perhaps the men sent over was so small a contingent that they were simply forgotten. Forgettable.

When the announcements regarding the Ship Launch reached Bear Island, Jorah was not planning to make a showing, not until a raven message followed from Lord Stark. Lord Stark was in correspondence with King Robert and Robert was so excited about the endeavors of his good-kin and Lord Stark was prudently curious about the results of his House's investment in the Iron Island Trading Company. He requested that the Mormonts, along with House Glover, Ryswell, Dustin, and Flint's Finger Flints, as Houses with experience dealing

with Ironmen, to be present, to give him a true report on how the lords seemed. The House Manderly would also be present for the purpose, as they were by the far the most experienced in the North with ships.

Jorah supposed that no other Northern Houses would be interested despite Lord Stark's interest being so great that he managed to have his brother Benjen present.

Jorah and his cousin Dacey traveled to Winterfell to discuss in greater detail with Lord Stark what he wished to know. He greeted Master Galbert Glover with careful cordiality; their mutual grieving over the death of his late wife Agnes Glover, Galbert's sister, had put pause to correspondence. They clasped hands and discussed quickly and Jorah found that both of them were carefully curious about the whole matter; they had no love for Ironmen, no, but the idea of an enterprise that would rival the Arsenal of Braavos was surely something new and worth consideration. The quarrelsome Lord Rodrik Ryswell was present and Jorah avoided him for his complaining about the upcoming traveling southward. He was dutiful, oh yes, he proclaimed, but the roads were dusty, the food at inns gave him the wind, and on and on and on. Jorah thought he would prefer the company of an Umber instead of a Ryswell, no matter that Umbers seemed to permanently bellow instead of using regular speech. Lady Dustin sent nobody. Lord Iver Flint showed himself, with a skeptical cant to his brow, but thankfully not prone to complaints, not like Lord Ryswell.

Ser Wylis Manderly represented his House and had much useful information. He brought with him reports and rumors regarding King's Landing's court and the state of trade. His own wife, being a Woolfield, told him of the excitement from her House about Southron wool merchants regarding the bulk pricing they could get from wool. Already, good wool fabrics were filtering into White Harbor and the improved quality, as well as being cheaper than handspun and handwoven cloth, was causing an upheaval of business practices. These fabrics were Reacher stuffs, coming out of the mysterious mills and factories held by the Florents and Tarlys (of all Houses). There were rumors that the same kinds of mills and factories were present in Storm's End holdings, which was unsurprising as it was known that Lord Renly was fostered with the younger Florents.

Lord Stark saw the sense of making contact with the Florents on the matter. Perhaps the Florents would be loathe to release the secrets of their clothmaking to the North. Or more likely, they would wish to draw up contracts allowing for some sort of partnership or leasing agreements. Either way, Ned was keen to see more Northmen clothed warmly with coppers per yard of wool. Benjen was privately advised to receive the Florents, to not take offense by their impertinent ways, and to try not to panic should any very shocking statements be made. Benjen raised an eyebrow at this, until Ned made a significant look at Jon Snow, now known as Benjen's bastard. On this secret matter, Benjen readily followed, once Ned explained it all, and extended affection to his hidden nephew openly when he made trips to Winterfell.

Ser Wylis was wise enough to bring a bolt of Reacher wool to show the lords assembled and Jorah and Dacey were impressed by the uniformity of the weave, to say nothing of the price. If they could get it for even cheaper should Lord Stark convince the Florents to release looms somehow to anyone in the North, what a great boon that would be!

After meeting and planning, everyone and Benjen went with Wylis southward to White Harbor where they would sail on to King's Landing. While being feasted there by the Manderlys, Jorah and Dacey were shown a printed book from Bellflower Press regarding current court etiquette and how to dance the Foxtrot by the Manderly sisters. House Florent's influence on the Master of Ships and the Royal Fleet was known; not only for the provisioning contract with the Crown, but the Manderlys could point out the Royal Fleet ships with regular patrol routes between White Harbor and King's Landing, with their gleaming brass hulls, bristling armaments, and flying daring amounts of sail. The captains readily told all who asked that Florent ideas caused these engineering changes.

Dacey was told by Wylla and Wynafryd that as all the Florent men were as yet unmarried, not even betrothed, that their grandfather wished to see about catching one of them for themselves. They spoke readily of both trying seriously to catch the eye of the heir, Alekyne. Rumors had it that Reacher as he was, he was not a typical soft Southron lordling, known only for carousing and entering into tournaments. He favored the bow and arrow for both hunting and on the battlefield, had a good seat while riding, and most interesting of all, was blessed with a beautiful singing voice. He was said to bathe at least once a week, had all his teeth, and was a good dancer.

Dacey was cautiously interested in what she heard. She asked Jorah for what he remembered of any of the Florents during the Greyjoy Rebellion. He said that as they were all on an entirely different island than him, he could say nothing about their showing on the battlefield. However, both the younger Florent cousins were knighted by their uncle Ser Colin afterwards. Lord Stark seemed predisposed to like the Florents. And it was said that all the Florents were friends, strange seeming as it was, with the famously prickly Lord Stannis Baratheon. In order to befriend the likes of the Master of Ships, they had to be dutiful and honorable men, at the least. During the feast at Lannisport, they danced and were all very good at the task. He had not seen any untoward behavior towards any women; not ladies nor serving girls. He had not heard any rumors of other vices either, but he himself was not prone towards gossip of that sort anyway.

Jorah then made a knowing look at Dacey and asked if she was entering the lists in the tournament of charms all the young ladies seemed to be entering for a Florent's favor. Dacey replied that she might as well; she may not suit some soft Southron lordling, but she was as good as any lady from any other lordly House for marrying, just as a single Bear Island warrior was worth ten men from anywhere else in the whole world in a fight. Jorah chuckled and agreed it was so and they practiced the foxtrot together, so that she could truly show herself to best advantage. Dacey kindly jested to Jorah that perhaps in all the feasting and fuss about the Ship Launch that he might find a second wife. Jorah shrugged. He supposed there may be looks askance at his lady cousin being heir unless she chose to marry off of the Island, but Bear Islanders cared little for the opinions of outsiders.

When they arrived at King's Landing, fellow veterans of the Greyjoy Rebellion greeted Jorah warmly, so that they at least did not have complete strangers beside them within the Great Hall, to see the Ironmen. While they waited, Jorah pointed out the Florents, gathered by the Iron Throne's dias, standing with Lord Baratheon. They were a tall family, and though the women hid the characteristic ears with the way they arranged their hair, it was easy to see it of the men. Only Lord Florent kept his greying hair long to his shoulders, brushed to cover

his ears, looking very distinguished indeed with his pointed beard. They formed a striking cluster of blue-clad figures, with flashes of orange at their collars and wrists.

The one who was Alekyne shared the lean, angular face of his father, kept clean shaven, and his sandy-colored forelocks parted on one side and brushed away from his face. He was in conversation with his cousins. As brothers, there was obvious resemblance between Ser Imry and Ser Erren. Both had stronger noses, shared by their sister, Lady Baratheon. Ser Imry was tanned, had a moustache, wore his hair like Alekyne, and Dacey noticed that he chose to wear a dagger at his hip and one in a boot, in addition to a sword. His brother in contrast was pale, with his hair closely cropped short. He was not overly armed like his brother, preferring to simply wear a sword.

All of the Florents had restless eyes, scanning the crowd as if they were on guard, though they held conversation and greeted those that went up to them with gracious attentiveness. Each of them made eye contact with her and each of their gazes slid away just as quickly, with no change in their studiously pleasant expressions. Jorah noted that to smile too quickly upon catching any lady's eye in a gossipy court was unwise.

Jorah maneuvered the both of them through the crowd after the Florents finished greeting the Ironmen and they succeeded in greeting Lord Florent in good time. Lord Florent proceeded to introduce his kin and Alekyne stepped forward first to greet Dacey as she curtsied.

Alekyne took her hand and bowed over it, pressing a polite kiss to the back of her hand.

When he stood back up, he tilted his head, a light of curiosity in his eyes.

“Calloused hands, my lady?”

Dacey barely resisted quickly drawing her hand back behind her back from him noticing.

“My cousin favors the mace,” Jorah said proudly. “She has no small skill with it.”

Dacey lifted her chin, daring any of these Southron lords to look askance. Instead, Alekyne smiled, delighted.

“Interesting. Do you spar with men?”

“The Ironmen who attack Bear Island are men,” Dacey replied. “So of course I do.”

“Then will you spar with me, these coming days?”

“And me!” Ser Erren's head popped out from behind Alekyne's shoulder. “We've not had interesting people to cross blades with for ever so long!”

Ser Imry looked fondly exasperated at his brother interrupting, but he looked at her with that same interest.

Dacey nodded. Perhaps they meant to mock her in the yard, but she'll show all of them.

Alekyne asked of their journey down south with genuine curiosity, wanting to know what they thought of King's Landing. Dacey spoke to him until the call was made for the feast and the crowd moved out of the throne room to the largest feasting hall of the Red Keep.

Dacey tried to take note on which young ladies the Florent men asked to dance. For the first few, they favored the women of their own family; certainly Alekyne was so kind as to ask his Aunt, Lady Samantha, mother of Lady Baratheon, to dance first. The three cycled through their kin first before asking others and Dacey noticed that all of them took the time to dance with plainer ladies in the hall. The Manderly sisters gossiped that the Florents are fiercely protective of Lady Selyse and there was no faster way to get any of them upset than by casting aspersions about her plainness. They extended this courtesy to other ladies and did not judge it fair that for lack of a pretty face a young woman should go through a feast without a partner to dance with.

Dacey found that she approved of this sort of attitude. The Manderly sisters were very hopeful indeed, but Alekyne did not seem to encourage the hopes of significantly younger ladies. They made do with dances with Imry or Erren. The call for the foxtrot came up and the women in the room straighten. Dacey gladdened when Alekyne approached her and extended his hand.

It was one thing to dance with as familiar a family member as her Cousin Jorah or a jolly, friendly sort as married Ser Wylis Manderly. It was another to dance with Alekyne. He was lean and adroit, he did not hold her too close, yet there was an attentive light to his eyes. He invited her to make herself acquainted with the location of the Red Keep's training yard as quickly as possible and that he would be waiting for her there in the mornings after breakfasting. As this dance didn't cause one to need to catch their breath, they spoke on their favorite dishes of the feast and he inquired as to how long she and the other Northerners intend to stay.

Benjen Stark was expected to leave the first, as he continues to have Night's Watch duties. It was entirely possible for her Cousin Jorah and herself to remain longer, as her own mother is very capable a castellan of Bear Island. This caused him to inquire as to her education in the duties her own House thought proper for a lady to know about the workings and management of a keep. Dacey demurred, as such weighty topics cannot be covered in great detail in the middle of a dance. Alekyne smiled and begged her forgiveness for his misstep and Dacey was entirely willing to grant it.

After Alekyne, young Lord Renly asked her for a dance. After that, one after another of the Florent men asked her to dance and before long, she was not without a partner as their cordiality with her caused her to become popular. She enjoyed the flow of food on the tables, she enjoyed the joyful bravado of the Ironmen jigging and the triumph of Lady Alannys Greyjoy, which she was not expecting. She noticed well enough that Alekyne was familiar with Lord Harlaw and that Ser Imry could comfortably move amongst them. She noticed that Lady Yara Greyjoy's eyes constantly sought out Ser Imry in the hall and that she was not the only one who did take note.

On that subject, the Manderly sisters were most useful, flitting about from one group of Crownland ladies to the next and coming back to her with news that Ser Imry was part of the

escorting party of the Ironmen all the way from Seaguard. They said that most nobody took it seriously, but what a laugh, wasn't it, that an Ironman woman should take a fancy to a Florent!

Dacey was not so sure; Ser Imry was worldly and traveled and he certainly had a dashing air about him. The younger Florent men made Alekyne seem more dignified in comparison. During their dances, Imry and Erren amused her with scurrilous gossip. Dacey did not know Alekyne very well, but his questions to her during the dance indicated a man who cares about the responsibilities that he will have to his inheritance and is willing to take his place without shirking his duties. Once again, she could approve of that.

The next day, they made their way to the Wendwater Royal Shipyard and the ship was lovely. Bear Islanders had their own fishing skiffs, of course, and they were familiar with the trading ships that enter their harbor, but such craft were all nothing to the sheer size and beauty of the Acclaim. While the ship blessing ceremonies were being conducted, the Florents gave talks to any interested about the ship herself. They all very proudly brought Lady Rhea forward, to explain.

Some men very rudely started asking her questions for the purpose of tripping her up, but she proved equal to their questions. Too many did not believe that most of the engineering and design was spearheaded by the lady in question, supported by the teams of engineers hired on from Oldtown by the Florents. Dacey was further gratified by how Alekyne and the Florent men readily deferred to Lady Rhea for the more technical questions, freely giving her credit.

The launch was simply wonderful. During the lunch after, a number of the Florent ladies went with Lady Arryn to speak to the Gulltown Arryns. Jorah understood Dacey's purpose enough and quietly went to the periphery of the group of young lords gathered around Alekyne to overhear the talk. Older lords were more comfortable speaking with Lord Florent, who spoke in a more sedate style than the fast-paced banter of the younger Florents. He would later report that they spoke about improving waterwheels or windmills for more than merely grinding grain (though that was a very useful thing to do anyway) and the upcoming difficulties of improving the King's Road through the Neck. Rumors were, and Jorah would not confirm one way or another, that Lord Stark had begun plans to rebuild Moat Cailin.

Instead of attempting to join any number of young ladies who were sitting in groups away from the young lords and giggling behind their hands as they observed and gossiped about said young lords, Dacey approached Lady Melessa Tarly. She was the picture of gracious motherhood, with a darling round-faced young son who bowed very correctly and a number of younger daughters, watched over by nurses. Lady Melessa greeted her with great friendliness and conversation was easily begun between them. Dacey knew that there must be some delicate Southron way of going about it, but she was but a Bear Island woman, so she asked very frankly about what his older sister had to say about Alekyne.

Lady Melessa was unstinting about her praise. By the time he was sixteen, he was already approaching their father about improvements to Brightwater Keep and its holdings, already shadowing their steward and asking their Uncle Axell questions when he was auditing their household accounts, already sitting in on petition sessions and comfortable riding out to meet with their smallfolk and resolving issues. Lady Melessa added with a twinkle in her eye that

Dacey was very welcome to attend the musicales that they were in the habit of holding at the Red Keep for the entertainment of the King.

Lady Melessa freely told Dacey about Alekyne's hopes for a wife; that he wanted somebody sensible and thrifty first off, with hopes that felicity in marriage would come from a compatibility in sensibility and that the woman in question could share in laughter, as the Florents loved to laugh and play as much as they valued duty and occupying their days with work.

Dacey thanked her for her frankness with her and took her leave. She would need to ask Cousin Jorah later what he thought of Alekyne and how he comported himself when amongst men. She returned to the Manderly sisters. Both were a little disappointed that Alekyne took no notice of them, but they said that they were told by other ladies that regularly attended court that none of the Florent men made any distinctions in general. They were favorite guests at dinners, ready with anecdotes and amusing stories, could appreciate efforts at singing or on the harps or bells, and were not impatient when shown embroidery work. The puzzle was that Alekyne would ask young ladies about matters that they were sure would be better answered by asking their fathers or brothers; about managing holdings, about livestock and harvests, about the health of their smallfolk. When he wasn't doing that, he was asking confusing questions about what they thought some old piece of historical event or occurrence meant, as if they ever aspired to be maesters!

Bear Island was small and insular enough that Dacey could not have afforded to not know the smallfolk. What an idea! They had to be very careful indeed to put by for winters, to know who was ill and not, to carefully stock up on medicinal herbs, to keep watch on the coasts for pirates and to be ready to repel reavers. There were also the bears on Bear Island, of course. Should a bear decide to invade a crofter's pigpen to make off with a hog, everybody had to quickly work together; children had to be carried off to safety, and men set to keep watch to see that it left in an orderly manner and for the crofter in question to be compensated. Hounds would be gathered, their baying encouraged to drive off the bear, and everybody would be on alert for days, until it was clear that the bear moved on back to the interior of the island.

Dacey supposed she was not so learned a person as the Florents, but it seemed that it was as true as Lady Melessa claimed; he was not looking for a pretty flower to display in his hall, to merely preside over entertainments. He wanted a capable woman, who knew to maintain a keep in good order. Dacey was sure she could do that, at least. If there was a House that can make do with little, it was House Mormont. If he or his father had not chosen any of these soft Southron ladies for a bride by now, then truly, she was not being blindly optimistic about her chances.

The day after that, Jorah and Dacey followed a Red Keep servant to the training yard. The King himself was there, happily bellowing as he sparred with two White Cloaks at the same time. They moved on to another part of the large yard, until they found the Florents. They were wearing short-sleeved shirts and worn out loose short trousers, suitable for training sessions. They were standing in front of a structure that Dacey had never seen before. There were bars that looked like chin up bars and Dacey would have thought they were for the purpose, except the structures were notched and taller than necessary and built over bales of straw covered with canvas.

“Ah, good morn!” Ser Erren called out. “You’re just in time to see the race!”

“Most chin ups in a minute?” guessed Jorah.

“To the top first!” Ser Imry pointed up to the topmost of the structure. The structure had long ropes tied to it, adjacent to the notched parts.

“We will spar afterwards, if it suit, Lady Dacey?” Alekyne waved at her.

“I look forward to it,” Dacey replied, smiling.

It was not exactly clear how they would ascend, unless it was by shimmying up the ropes. Jorah and Dacey moved away, to get a clearer view. The three Florents arranged themselves into position and at a whistle from one of the men-at-arms, all of them took running jumps to clear the straw bales and caught hold of the chin up bars.

A heaving flex of their arms and Dacey gasped as the men made the bars jump from the notches and hook into position on a higher set of notches.

“Ingenious,” Jorah murmured.

“They call it the salmon ladder,” Benjen Stark mentioned after he made his way to stand beside them. “I shall have to get the design for the Brothers. Anything to keep training interesting.”

Cheers and yells came from the group of bystanders as the Florents made their way. Ser Imry gained quick lead, followed closely by Alekyne, until Alekyne misjudged a jump and one end of the bar missed and slipped back down to a lower notch, causing Dacey to gasp as he dangled unbalanced. He adjusted for it with another jump, but that was enough for Ser Erren to get ahead. In the end Ser Imry finished first at ten jumps and he shimmied back down using the rope. Ser Erren finished second and Alekyne third.

His cousins did not harry him too much for losing; they all said it was clearly because he was so accustomed to training his archery that his right arm was that much stronger than his left to cause an imbalance. Jorah himself tried and succeeded in jumping four rungs, before the bar slipped and he was sent dropping backwards into the straw bales. He shook out his hands, and agreed with Benjen that this apparatus was suitably challenging and amusing. It turned out that the Florents in service to training the Goldcloaks and Royal Marines had devised a more than typical obstacle course, one that had the men climbing, jumping, and balancing as they went. Jorah was glad to have found something to interest him given their tentative plans for staying in King’s Landing. Omer and Merrell approached and said that there was a setup at the Florent manse, the Foxhole, suitable for a woman to try, as the notches were placed closer together to accommodate them when they were younger. At this time of day, it would be Samwell Tarly training. They were here because their cousin Sam would rather practice out of sight by himself. He was a little shy.

In the time that Dacey spoke to them, while the older Florents left to get into their armor, it was clear that they did not find her an oddity to be mocked. They were all merely extremely curious.

Dacey was impatient to fight Alekyne, to see if he was the sort to hold back when faced with a woman or somebody who would be serious about testing skill. From the first blocked strike with her shield, it was clear that he was not just humoring her; it was as forceful as Cousin Jorah's hits. She exhaled and lunged with her shield to bash him and he danced backwards. They circled, trading hits, until she was sure. He had greater reach than Cousin Jorah, but reach was nothing once she closed.

The opportunity came and she bellowed, charging, her sparring mace clanking with rapid strikes at his shoulders and helmet, until she tripped him with a practiced move and he fell with a great crash of armor. She brought her mace down with a decisive blow to the dirt beside his head; obviously she had the killing strike.

"I yield!"

Alekyne lifted the visor of his helmet, laughing.

"Marvelous!" he cried out.

The Florents were clapping for her, fair as they were. King Robert himself was there, clapping a congratulatory hand on Cousin Jorah's back, laughing about how he had missed being around a Northern woman of spirit.

Dacey held out her hand and Alekyne did not hesitate to take it in order to get up.

There was clapping from above and Dacey raised her head to see ladies observing from the overhead gallery. Lady Baratheon and her lady cousins waved. Dacey waved back.

After that, it was Ser Erren, who was most eager. They traded blows until she had the measure of his reaction time and she was able to stun him with the edge of her shield while smacking him soundly with her mace. Ser Imry was the one to finally win; she was beginning to get winded and he favored an arming sword and dagger. As evidenced by him winning at the salmon ladder, he had tremendous force behind his double-handed strikes and he was the fastest amongst his kin.

Dacey had more opportunity to speak with Alekyne as they rested between bouts, where Cousin Jorah usefully gave them the time to do so by agreeing to spar with the Florents and the King. He inquired about her training, about her other interests, about what she would most desire in the future. She replied that she liked hunting and the feeling of peace that came from wandering into a deep forest. On the subject of the future, she was not so sure that she could reveal her thoughts on so short an acquaintance.

Alekyne smiled and invited her to join a hunting party in the Kingswood if she would like.

"I wish to be better acquainted, don't you?" he asked.

She was curious. And if she was honest with herself, his strength at arms and the strength in his arms was compelling.

"I wish it also," she replied. "Your sister mentioned a musicale, tonight?"

“Yes. Will I see you there?”

Dacey nodded.

King Robert never did forget how fine the Florents sounded in Storm’s End and found that he quite enjoyed having some entertainment from his good-kin, for as many imitators there were amongst the court musicians, they didn’t have the same quality. Not the swagger, as Erren would say. So every so often (but especially on this occasion with the Ship Launch, allowing for more of the Florents to be present) the Florents put on private shows for the court’s amusement.

There was no particular protocol of dress needed and it was informal enough compared to a ball or feast that children were often in attendance. The food was also kept simple, being soups and bread bundles. As it was an idea of the Florents, and with all of them present, this latest one turned into a showcase for their talent; usually there were slots and ladies (or men) who wished to perform would sign up. Not many did; why would they, when they could hire mummers? There were not half so many who wished to attend the musicale as for a proper feast or ball and far more women than men at that. When Dacey and Jorah entered the smaller hall set aside for the occasion, they were waved down by an eager Wylla to take a seat; the sisters were unfashionably early and took over the seats for them in anticipation.

Dacey could appreciate any musical talent at all; with so few mummers making the trip to Bear Island, anybody who can hold a tune or even whistle creditably were popular in the evening gatherings at home.

As guest, House Caron’s own Lord Bryce was first up and he sang very well indeed, a ballad in the robust and simple style of the Stormlands. King Robert smiled and clapped. It really was a pity, Dacey thought to herself, that no other of his family were present; it was said that Caron voices were famously sweet and to hear a Caron lady was to hear rare talent.

Next up were the youngest Florents, Omer and Merrell with Lord Renly. Samwell Tarly stood up also with the accompanying musicians, surprisingly, clutching a tambourine and looking unsure. The musicians began and the three singers arranged themselves into a line and started stepping and rocking in unison. They sang an older Florent favorite, ‘I Can’t Help Myself’. Sam was blushing, but he was definitely keeping up on his tambourine, buoyed by the clapping along of his mother Melessa in the audience. His father grumbled to himself, but had to behave as Melessa’s elbow was unerring and sharp and he was sitting beside Lord Florent.

At the end of the song, the cousins and Lord Renly clapped for Sam, who flushed brighter while grinning, as this was his first performance in front of a proper gathering. Dacey clapped, charmed and quite liking the happiness of the song. Lady Delena went up alone, to perform ‘Girl from Ipanema’. Dacey frowned curiously, having never heard of such a place before, but the idea of it, the quiet lovelorn quality of the song was wonderful. She had never heard a song its like. Lady Delena’s smoky, evocative voice was in good form for her next song, ‘Here Comes the Rain Again’, to more applause. Lady Delena made her bow.

The original three of Ladies Selyse, Melessa, and Rhea stood up and performed ‘Be My Baby’, and Dacey smiled to see Imry joining the backing musicians, with a pair of spoons

clinking away in rhythm. They went through older favorites: ‘Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White’, ‘How Deep is Your Love’ and ‘You Can’t Hurry Love’. Dacey found it charming, how they stepped and swayed like the younger Florents while coquetting with their shoulders and making little elegant gestures of their hands and saucy smiles.

And lastly, Selyse stood alone, announced that she dedicated a song to her husband, Lord Stannis. Dacey looked, along with everybody else, at Lord Stannis, who sat beside the King. He blinked and the King laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. Violins softly started and her powerful voice rang out with the first notes of ‘At Last’. Dacey was moved to press her hands to her cheeks, transported by the way Lady Selyse sang to Lord Stannis, gesturing towards him with her hand and the way he blinked at her, a little awestruck, a little embarrassed, and returning her bright smile with a brief, small smile of his own.

In the end, it was Alekyne, Imry, Erren, and Omer on the stage. They arranged themselves and began some slower songs: ‘Put Your Head on My Shoulder’, ‘Only the Lonely’, ‘The Best is Yet to Come’, ‘Two Occasions’, and ‘Unchained Melody’. Alekyne took turns with Imry as lead singer and he was as good as the rumors said. There was a playful, assured ease with his delivery that was enchanting. Dacey put a hand to her mouth, as she could not help smiling at Alekyne as he stepped and strut through his songs, culminating with the apparent crowd favorite of ‘Can’t Take My Eyes Off of You’.

She and Cousin Jorah stood to applaud the Florents, who grinned and waved. It was late and they had to go. Dacey pulled on Jorah’s hand and they stayed behind a little longer. A number of other young ladies had the same idea and Alekyne and his cousins were swamped by giggling, cooing well-wishers. Alekyne and his cousins were all gracious, bowing again and again as they slowly made their way to the door. Luckily, Dacey made eye contact with Alekyne and she smiled. He smiled back, she was sure of it. She would elbow her way through the crowd to him, but surely that was too uncouth here in the South.

They met again in the mornings at the training yard before a party of Florent family went out into the Kingswood for a hunt. There were plenty of moments for the two of them to converse and Dacey found herself charmed. She felt that he was just as a young lord ought to be; sensible, yet lively, dutiful, yet with happy manners. As she was a Bear Island woman, she directly informed him within a fortnight of their stay in King’s Landing that should he go to his father to inform him to begin marriage negotiations, she would not be opposed. Alekyne laughed cheerfully and said that though she claimed she was not opposed, it was not such an encouragement as she thought. Did she truly consider their chances of marital felicity?

Dacey pursed her lips, which made him smile, wondering on how forward she could afford to be in the South.

“I think you would make a good a husband as I could hope,” Dacey said. “I do not know the fancy words you do or how to make them go so poetically. But I surely know that I like you.”

“Like?” Alekyne tilted his head, with a reassuring seriousness in his look.

“More than any man I’ve met. Enough to stake my life with yours. Now you know.”

“I like you, also. Definitely. Tremendously. Outrageously.”

Dacey laughed as Alekyne went on.

“Then you had better go and tell your father. I will speak with Cousin Jorah.”

“Expeditiously!” he grinned, and left to ride immediately to the Foxhole.

Lord Alester was not overjoyed at the prospect of a bride for his heir who would bring nothing except timber and a few bearskin rugs as dowry, if that. Bear Island was that poor. However, he had long been used to the ways the young Florents could lay out their arguments to get their way and his son was silver-tongued, at that. Alekyne saw that Dacey got on with his sisters and Cousin Selyse; surely between the three of them had they found any serious fault they would have informed him. That was in addition to his own quietly building network of informants. She was of irreproachable reputation and only scandalous in the South because she used a weapon in the traditional manner of her people. He certainly didn't disapprove and in fact was more enamoured with her because of it. What warriors their children could be!

She was earnest and plain-spoken. This might have been boring compared to the sophisticates of court, but there was a sheer honesty and practicality in her manner also echoed by Lord Jorah that Alekyne was starting to see was a prototypical Northern way, after conversing with Benjen Stark, and the lords Flint, Glover, and Ryswell. She knew her people, she knew Bear Island, there was so much that she knew firsthand about being a good sort of noble; the kind that took fealty and duty to smallfolk seriously. Perhaps she didn't know the words and concepts about the inherent dignity of the common people as posited and championed by Selyse in their private evening talks at the Foxhole, but she lived it. On so small and precarious an island holding, the Mormonts held fast and lived true and free without needing to resort to reaving the Iron Islands way. There were thousands of years worth of toughness bred into the Mormont line, no matter that there were rumors of the shaky paternity of any of the Mormont lords given the propensity of the women for having “missing husbands”. He was Florent. His House needed a tough woman. He found one such. For all that he himself enjoyed wordplay and subterfuge, it would be a relief to have no such pretenses in the safety of home. To have something of that honesty he observed between Selyse and her Stannis. Of course it didn't hurt that Dacey was also attractive to look upon.

Between Alekyne's reasoning and sentiments and Selyse's confirmation that this would be a suitable social misdirection for the gossiping courtiers of King's Landing in service to their House's myriad workings, he went to meet with Lord Jorah. Lord Alester could afford to be generous. The current accountants of Brightwater Keep were very well trained by Axell, and it was no trouble at all to have a summary report on the incomes and net profits of the various Florent business holdings brought together. Jorah's eyebrows raised once it became clear that his niece would be provided for beyond his wildest ambitions.

“Whatever is the traditional amount a Mormont lady brings with her in marriage, we appreciate and accept. But as my son has no want for funds or material things, let us speak on how my House can benefit yours, shall we?”

The gifts to the Dragonstone smallfolk, to Lord Harlaw, to the Royces, would pale beside the bounty that Lord Alester would vest upon House Mormont and Bear Island. To begin with Lord Jorah was given the opportunity to build Mormont Keep anew, not with costly imported stone, but with an engineered building substance of the Florents, called concrete. Planning for a network of signal towers. The fighting men and women of Bear Island would be given new forged armor and weapons, the crofters would have the seed drills, harvesters, threshers, and new waterwheels or windmills to power mills, the fishermen would have new fishing nets, and yards and yards of good cloth; canvas for sails and tents for hunters, cotton and wool for clothing. He would gain an entire new library of useful and entertaining books. The works of the Florents were many and they would have them at Bear Island from the love of the Florent heir.

Jorah accepted readily. He knew that the Florents could not be so generous for no reason; surely they had interests in the North and wanted his House as an intermediary with Lord Stark. That can only benefit House Mormont. His only real stipulation was that Dacey be married in a godswood, in front of a proper heart tree. Alester agreed to that easily; Brightwater Keep had a small godswood of its own, with a heart tree that had a quizzical face. In the meantime, they could plan for the wedding and the Mormonts could begin the improvements immediately to Bear Island. A small celebratory dinner was held in the Foxhole and Dacey and Jorah were gladdened by the enthusiasm of the Florents.

King's Landing: Ed, Edd, or Eddy

Lord Florent announced privately to family at the Foxhole during breakfast that negotiations were complete and that Alekyne was officially betrothed to Lady Dacey Mormont. Stannis was preparing to leave for the Red Keep afterwards, except that there was a lone lurking figure at the corner of his eye.

Merrell, the quietest, most sneaking-est Florent yet, was standing behind him. It was years of being used to Merrell's ways that prevented Stannis from startling when he turned and discovered he was being stared at. Merrell was being a creepy unblinking statue again.

It was in his nature to be beneath notice and Selyse absolutely encouraged this; he was the strange child who thought it fun to sit and regulate his breathing and when playing Murder, the disconcerting habit of falling onto the ground with his limbs splayed out and then going so still as to merit second looks for appearing so dead. (He'd terrified poor Sam more than once by simply posing dead in random rooms, waiting for anybody to enter.) He was an ambush player; whereas Imry and the others liked to actively hunt, he would seek out alcoves, side chambers, large doors to hide behind and wait. He waited, almost always one of two last ones left by evening, and if the other player was unlucky enough to wander past his perch, he'd have the drop on them. Throatstab, throatstab, throatstab.

Stannis vaguely worried about when Merrell would grow up enough to have the strength and mass to start training at garrots.

"What is it?" Stannis asked.

"You need to speak to Renly."

"What about?"

"He's angry. I don't want to get punched in the face. On accident. When I surprise him."

Stannis frowned; Renly did not often show his temper. Everybody had given up on getting Merrell to at least have audible footfalls. He was getting better at approaching people to the side instead of from behind, but Imry was always encouraging him otherwise.

"Where is he?"

"The training yard."

Well. Stannis would see him and then go. He could afford to be a little late for once to Small Council. He turned to pick up his folio and when he looked up, Merrell was gone. Now that always startled Stannis; he was as elusive as a shadow. He walked to the training yard and Renly was wildly whacking away at a sandbag with a training hammer, grunting and snarling as he went.

Stannis watched him and saw it true, that Baratheon fury in all its futile violence, a state that luckily he had not seen in Robert lately.

“Renly,” he called out.

Renly turned, startled, and the hammer dropped onto the dirt. He stood, flushed, breathing hard. He lifted a hand to wipe at his eyes.

“Renly,” Stannis approached.

“I apologize,” Renly bit out. “I’m having a stupid emotion and I lost control.”

“Better the sandbag than somebody else,” Stannis said. “Do you wish to speak of it? Why did this happen?”

Renly’s jaw worked and Stannis reached out to put his hand there as Selyse did for him.

“... He’s getting married.”

Stannis blinked at Renly and Renly stood, silent and watchful.

“... Do you dislike the Lady Mormont?”

Renly shook his head and met Stannis’ eyes in mute terror and anguish. Stannis’ eyes widened for a moment and he wished that Selyse was here. Surely, it was too early? He’s only thirteen!

“It’s stupid,” Renly muttered, stepping away from him.

“No,” Stannis could not help the bark in his voice. “Renly. Young fancies are. Normal.”

Renly shook his head and stepped back again. Godsdamnit. Selyse would be so much better at this!

They stared at each other.

“You are my little brother and I love you,” Stannis finally said, stymied. “So. Whatever it is. It will be well.”

Renly sniffed and wiped his eyes again.

“I don’t think I will be well. That I am well. These emotions are all wrong.”

“Young fancies are normal,” Stannis repeated himself. “You will not always feel this way about Alekyne.”

“... And if it’s another man?” Renly scowled at him. “What then? You’ll not want me shaming-”

“That is not shameful,” Stannis snapped at him.

He stepped back himself, and took a deep breath through his nose.

“The Dornish Vice,” Renly sneered in response. “How can Stormlanders rally to a Lord Paramount like me?”

“Selyse says. That some people are born this way. You are well, just the way you are.”

“And Selyse is always right, is that it?”

“She’s not infallible. But in this, she must be. I think so.”

Some of the tension left Renly’s jaw.

“...What about the Faith’s teachings?”

“I cannot fairly say,” Stannis shrugged. “You know I do not hold with the Seven.”

Renly nodded after a moment of consideration.

“Believe what you will,” Stannis continued. “But I certainly would not support something that does not think you right just the way you are. It’s illogical.”

“Selyse would say that,” Renly made a wobbly smile.

Stannis nodded and not knowing what else to do, held his arms out. Renly stepped forward to embrace him without hesitation, so apparently it was the right thing to do.

“If you wish to speak on it more, you can always come to me. Of course, Selyse would be better-”

“You are good enough,” Renly shook his head, fondly. “Just the way you are, too, Stannis.”

Stannis swallowed.

“You were always there. You weren’t fun. You didn’t let me put off lessons. You didn’t let me have so many tarts from the kitchens as I liked. But we were there. Together. Went hungry together.”

“... Yes.”

“You are my big brother and I love you,” Renly said with firm finality.

Renly took a step back, to go pick up the hammer and they took their leave of each other for the day.

Queen Cersei’s water broke in the middle of the night while she was in a dreamwine sleep. She thrashed and cried out, the pain waking her at last and a flurry of panicked activity began. She expected it to be like last time; for Pycelle to be called in, and her handmaids to be useless lumps surrounding her. She was not expecting Robert to come striding in, stinking

of vinegar and wearing a smock. He made orders and humiliatingly, she was stripped out of her nightgown and servants were wiping at her with vinegar. She could not understand the purpose of it, but she was in too much pain to resist. Her hair was hastily braided and pinned out of the way and a cap tied over it. A smock was put on her and shamefully it did not even come over the tops of her thighs, she was so big. To more of her shock, Robert picked her up and began marching out of her chambers.

“Put me down! Arrrgh! What is the meaning of this! Oaf!”

“Getting you to the proper birthing chamber, of course!” Robert said.

“You-! What-!”

“Don’t worry, I won’t drop you!”

That was not what she was concerned about. She could see Jaime striding after them and it was good to have him there. Robert stopped in front of an unfamiliar chamber of the Red Keep and put her down. She had no choice but to waddle into the so called birthing chamber. Robert followed her and shut the door on Jaime.

It was dreadful. Bare of anything, with some strange, metal chair-table covered in a sheet that looked more a dungeon’s torture device than anything a laboring woman would want. The room reeked of vinegar.

“I am not staying here!” Cersei tried to stand tall, but another spasm of pain prevented her from doing so.

“But it’s clean!” Robert replied, waving his hands. “Safer for everybody and you will have less risk of infection! Can’t risk birthing bed fever!”

Cersei rolled her eyes and was forced by another contraction to lay on her side on the metal chair-thing. It was cold! She hated it!

She could hear the wavering voice of Pycelle coming from behind the door. Robert stood up and opened the door only long enough to stick his head out and informed Pycelle that by order of the King, he was not to come in until he had disinfected himself with soap and vinegar and to get a fresh pair of robes. Preferably a smock, as they were for sure clean. Pycelle sputtered, but Robert shut the door on him. They were left alone again.

“Why are you still here!?” Cersei growled.

“Stannis was with Selyse. So I will be here too. I ought to have been for Joffrey, but I wasn’t. This time, I’m doing it right.”

Oh, gods, curse him and his stupid brother and their stupid competitions! Who needed a great big lump in the room while laboring!?

“I don’t need you! I don’t need anybody!”

Robert, under the impression that her ill temper was the understandable consequence of pain, merely sat on a bare wooden chair and smiled at her.

“Pycelle will be back. In the meantime, I will wait.”

“You’ll wait hours, even a day? Hah!” Cersei barked at him the way he’s barked that stupid laugh at her.

“I’m not afraid of blood and pain,” Robert nodded. “I will wait. Perhaps this time will not be so difficult. You have done it once before, so you know what to expect.”

Cersei made another inarticulate sound of rage.

Cersei wanted to throw something at him, but it appeared that there is nothing in this room worth throwing. She was in pain, her lump of a husband was refusing to leave, and she’s cold!

“I’m cold.”

Robert went to the lone other table in the room and picked up a cotton sheet. It is big enough to fold several times to drape over her shoulders. Cersei sniffed. Robert returned to his seat. Cersei supposed he was regretting saying he’ll stay, after all; he’s begun tapping his toes and fidgeting.

“Oh, how you can wait,” Cersei sneered.

“Will you not take some turns about the room with me? Light exertion may help move things along.”

What did he know? Cersei grimaced. The only good thing at the moment was that she could have free rein to all her disgust on her face and he would think it was from labor pains.

Pycelle was finally let in and poked and prodded at her, asking her questions like the last time. She did not know how long it was between contractions! How could anybody! Robert gave an order and servants were dispatched to carry in the mechanical clock. The clock that Tyrion invented. Ooh! How she hated the look of the thing! Jaime told her that Father let him establish a guild and workshop making the contraptions and that space was set aside already for the business at Casterly Rock! Cersei was angry about Tyrion receiving any such permissions to do anysuchthing that he wanted from Father, but on the other hand, surely this meant that if Tyrion was being allowed to sully himself with trade, that perhaps Father was planning to have him earn his way instead of getting Casterly Rock? But then he’d be worse than Lannisport Lannisters! It wasn’t to be borne, going so low as trade! They were Lannisters of the Rock! But then again Father would probably say that’s the most that a dwarf deserves-! Oh! It was all so confusing! And that made her angrier.

She stewed and groaned, while Pycelle sat by and made sure to inquire as to each time the contractions happened, watching the clock to ascertain the duration. The clock ticked on, the cuckoo called as the hours passed. Eventually, she allowed Robert to hold her, to lean on him

as she took wobbly steps around the room. The pain was getting worse. She went to the metal chair-thing and Robert helped her into it. Surely now she can push! She huffed.

Pycelle went to the door to call for the handmaids who helped her last time.

Cersei cried out.

“That one came at one minute,” Robert mentioned to Pycelle.

Oh, she felt so sick!

Pycelle distractedly waved a hand at Robert, bending over to peer between Cersei’s legs. Without any warning, a great cracking thunderclap of a fart resounded and Pycelle scrambled backwards and nearly fell onto the floor. Cersei shrieked. Robert began howling with laughter, despite himself.

“A coming storm, the rolling thunder!” he hooted. “Stormlanders say that’s a good omen!”

Cersei burst into humiliated tears and began pounding her fists on Robert’s arms, and he let her, still laughing. Eventually he calmed and apologized for it (she scoffed) and held her hand while Pycelle cautiously tried to ascertain whatever it was that he was supposed to look for between her legs.

“It is in readiness, Your Grace,” Pycelle finally said, withdrawing his fingers and gesturing at the handmaids to make ready with the towels. “Push, Your Grace!”

Cersei roared like the lioness she was, digging her nails into Robert’s hand. Oh, the pain! The humiliation, the sweat dripping down her brow, the whole stupid-! Her free hand pounded on the unforgiving metal chair-thing. Robert had moved, his other arm coming around her back, propping her upright with his strength.

“Deep breaths,” Robert puffed at her face. “Find your wind!”

“I’ll show you wind-!” Cersei howled. “OAF! RRRAAAAAGH!”

Robert stood and didn’t flinch as she crushed his hand, encouraging her to breathe as she struggled on.

“You’re doing great, keep on pushing!” Robert replied. “Keep on pushing!”

Pycelle’s wobbly voice said something about the head of the baby and Robert cried out more encouragement, which Cersei drowned out with more of her screaming.

Oh, gods, she was dying, she was dying-!

A piercing wail, an infant’s cry, rang out just as she was making an inhale to cry out herself.

Robert’s eyes widened and his mouth became an amazed O.

Cersei collapsed backward onto the hard chair-thing, while the handmaids wiped at the sweat and blood, cleaning her. Pycelle was tying off the umbilical cord and giving orders.

“My baby! My baby!” Cersei croaked out, her voice lost from screaming, her hands reaching out.

“Your Graces,” Pycelle’s mustache twitched into a congratulatory smile. “You have another son.”

“HAH!” Robert crowed. “Do you see him, Cersei!”

Pycelle approached with the cleaned and swaddled infant and put him into Cersei’s arms. The baby still cried and Cersei made shushing noises, rocking him. A son! Wait until Jaime sees-

A downy cap of black hair covered the head of her son.

“He’s so amazing!” Robert’s voice cooed. “Hello! Oh!”

Robert had put his finger within reach and the infant gripped it.

“A fighter! Aren’t you, little tyke! Cersei, this is wonderful!”

“Yes,” Cersei whispered. “Wonderful.”

“Ring the bells!” Robert cheerfully bellowed out to the servants in the hall. “Ring all of them! A new prince! Tell Stannis! Tell Renly! Tell absolutely everybody!”

Stannis and Renly arrived shortly, having ridden up to the Red Keep to the pealing of the bells. They were shown to the birthing chamber, after Cersei was covered sufficiently with more cotton sheets. She was still trying to settle the baby, yet he still cried, adamantly unhappy and unwilling to nurse. Robert stood by, not knowing what to do and Cersei refusing to let him hold the baby, snapping that she did not suffer so just to have him drop the baby. Robert laughed. Jaime was there too, looking a little out of sorts. Stannis’ mouth twitched when he finally got a good look at the baby.

“Oh, he’s so like Armand!” Renly said. “He’s even purple! I suppose babies just come out like that?”

Robert’s eyebrows raised and Stannis coughed.

“Your Grace, if I may?” Stannis went over and held out his hands.

Cersei frowned suspiciously at him, but acquiesced. Stannis picked the baby up, palm over the chest and arms, supporting the baby’s chin over his thumb and scooped the baby’s bottom into his other palm and righted him so that the baby was no longer on his back but tilted forward as if he was a rider on a horse. The baby quieted as Stannis wobbled him gently in the air. Robert and Cersei’s mouths dropped open. Jaime’s eyebrows raised.

“Ah. So he is like Armand,” Stannis concluded. “Robert, do pay attention. Baratheons are endless screamers at this age, apparently, and this is the fastest method of getting them to shut up. You see that his arms must be curled against his chest like so-”

“Quite a trick!” Robert came over to observe.

After Stannis’ thorough explanation on the way to calm the baby, Cersei reluctantly nodded and Robert got to hold the baby, his big hands easily cradling him. The infant was now calm, blinking.

“What’s his name?” Renly asked.

“Well, Cersei named Joffrey,” Robert looked at her with question in his eyes. “Would be fair to let me choose this time.”

Cersei’s nostrils flared for a moment but she nodded.

“Eddard,” Robert said promptly. “Eddard Baratheon sounds fine, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” Stannis agreed simply.

“Prince Eddard Baratheon,” Renly smiled and clapped his hands. “That sounds just right.”

If little Eddard had any thoughts on the grand event of finally having a name, he kept it to himself. He yawned and was passed back to Cersei. She held him close, looking at him.

“I am fatigued,” she finally announced. “Leave us.”

Robert patted Cersei’s shoulder, repeated how happy he was and how great Cersei was for making such a fine son.

Everybody bowed and left.

Robert went to the Throne Room, where he would receive the first well-wishes from the people within the Red Keep. Stannis and Renly returned to the Foxhole, as it was a given that absolutely nothing would be accomplished of regular office work that day. Renly went to tell Omer, Merrell, and Sam. Stannis went to find Selyse and they retreated into the security and privacy of their bedroom.

“Well?”

“A boy. Trueborn, if I understand your genetics treatises. Black of hair. Blue eyes, but many babies start with blue eyes. We can wait and see.”

“Curiouser and curiouser. But then, we did make that gamble.”

Stannis kissed her.

“We did,” he agreed.

He had been most strenuously resistant to her idea from the beginning of having sex in his office. It was their first real fight. But she wore him down with her reasoning and her seductions. In this case, he is glad that she succeeded. Trust Robert to be so predictably competitive! Hah, indeed.

“He is named Eddard.”

They sat, holding hands, and Selyse drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair.

“Cersei. How did she look?” she finally asked. “Does she care for the baby?”

“I cannot tell,” Stannis says. “Surely, she must? You wrote that she loved all her children. The one redeeming quality of a vile mind.”

“It isn’t clear how much of it is because they are her children and how much of it is because they were all Jaime’s children as well in the end,” Selyse shook her head. “You cannot predict with that kind of crazy.”

“With a trueborn prince, provided he lives past the age of ten, the banners would respond better for a call to support a regency should the worst happen,” Stannis slowly said. “Than a call to pledge fealty to me.”

“You’re better liked now,” Selyse kissed him. “But yes. Eddard is important to the Seven Kingdoms more than he knows. That is quite a burden. Poor child.”

They sat for a time, silent.

“It may not come to pass,” Stannis finally said. “As long as Renly and I, you, Jon, even Ned Stark are around to keep Robert on that Throne and away from drink, he may live to see the rise of the White Walkers. He would be the perfect war king to rally the living to the right cause. Granted, it seems that Baratheons have a distressing tendency to live fast and die young. That may all be for naught.”

“True. True. That is why we prepare, after all.”

Stannis nodded. It would be much, much easier, if in the upcoming chaos of an undead invasion that at the least the leadership of the Seven Kingdoms was not compromised as well.

“So. You’re now the most amazing, favored, valuable uncle, yes? Showed everybody the Baratheon Baby Bobble?”

Stannis’ lips thinned at the phrasing, but he nodded.

“Yes. I expect that Robert will be making daily appearances at the nursery now that I have demonstrated such skill at baby wrangling. Next Small Council I will be sure to brag obnoxiously about how Armand can communicate his wishes with baby sign language. He will not be able to resist attempting the same with the baby. With him so often at the nursery, so interested, little Eddard will be watched with more care. I will also Tom Sawyer Robert into interacting with Joffrey more by paying attention to him myself. If I can succeed in

getting the little monster into expressing affection towards me, Imry is going to pay me five Dragons.”

“Did Imry Tom Sawyer you into interacting with Joffrey?”

“Would that he did. No. It is a duty. If by chance the myriad of those who oppose the Baratheon Dynasty get to Robert first, we must endure Joffrey and prevent civil war. I will tolerate him as King if we need to, so long as there is war against the White Walkers in the end. Better to do so with him and his monstrous tendencies curtailed. Molded. Focused.”

Stannis paused and quirked an eyebrow upward.

“Better him as first target for Daenerys.”

Selyse leaned against him, embracing him as she muffled her laughter into his chest.

They went to spend time with Armand. Stannis with his daily work had not spent much time with Armand during the daylight hours, except on sevendays. He watched as Armand played, which was a strange ritual of Armand walking in circles in the nursery, picking up and dropping cloth balls or wooden blocks as the mood took him. He used to sit and gnaw at teething rings. Now that he could walk, he stayed upright and constantly on the move.

“On the patrol, he is,” Selyse laughed.

Armand turned his head upon hearing Selyse’s laugh. He grinned, which made Selyse grin wider and clap her hands.

Armand copied her and Selyse praised him as her smart boy. Armand approached and slapped his hands upon their knees.

“Up? You want up?”

Armand grunted.

Selyse lifted him into the air, groaning a little dramatically.

“Oof, you’ve gotten heavier. My big baby! My growing bean!” she spun in a circle with Armand in her arms and he cackled.

“Come on, Stanny, come on and make him laugh!”

Stannis stood up and Selyse passed Armand to him. He spun in a circle too and Armand laughed some more. Stannis stopped and holding on firmly, turned Armand upside down.

“You are suddenly upside down,” Stannis informed Armand.

Armand grinned, unafraid of this turn of events. Stannis righted him.

“Right side up.”

Armand grinned.

“Suddenly upside down.”

Armand cackled.

“Right side up.”

Stannis repeated this for a time and then stopped just in case Armand became too dizzy. He put Armand back down on the floor and Selyse chuckled as Armand stumbled about like a drunkard, finding his balance. He marched off in that high-kneed wobble of toddlers, ignoring them in favor of another toy to pick up and carry off.

“Renly probably will never have this,” Stannis said suddenly.

Selyse looked at him and put her hand in his.

“He told me,” Stannis continued. “He’s been enamored of Alekyne for who knows how long. And now I know from him and not from your writings.”

Selyse nodded.

“How does that make you feel?”

Stannis frowned as he tried to work it out. It’s not easy, separating out feelings and thinking on how they affected him.

“Some sort of sad,” he concluded. “I don’t know if he would care to be a father. But I do know that I am happier now that Armand is here as a person than without. I wish for Renly to know this kind of happiness. Being a proper father.”

Selyse nodded.

“It would shore up our position to have him do his duty and sire heirs,” Stannis continued. “But we are not Dornish. It would cause scandal and risk if he should take a wife and not touch her but rarely and then have male paramours. Stormlanders would not tolerate it, not at all.”

“And besides the political, there is the personal. It is difficult enough for people like Renly. It would grieve me to have him suffer a loveless marriage in such a way, when he has known love and healing for so long,” Selyse said.

“Yes,” Stannis agreed.

It’s not fair. For who would have expected the third son to become Lord Paramount? And even if it were not such a long shot, for a third son that was affected by the Dornish Vice? Renly’s lot in life was uniquely challenging and up until now, he was probably laboring under the idea that his own brothers would denounce him. Stannis managed almost by accident to reassure him. He wanted to keep suffering away from Renly, somehow. He had slowly talked to Selyse over time about the siege.

It is one thing, he knew, to make the choice of brother over king, allegiance to family above all. That the Mad King made it insultingly easy by calling for his brother's head when his brother was the wronged one through Prince Rhaegar's folly with Lyanna Stark made no difference. Stannis chose treason. Renly had no choice in the siege or war, he was a child and carried along to starvation in Stannis' wake. For that, Stannis thought it right that he should do what he could to atone for it.

This was beyond him, however. What could be done, really? Search out for some noble maid of the suitable standing, a fellow homosexual who would not mind Renly's disinterest in her and the two of them discreetly seeking out paramours on their own while peaceably raising the next generation of Storm's End Baratheons? No, life was not so easy as that. Renly could not possibly be so lucky.

He deserved to be loved, thought Stannis. He deserved proper happiness, to know it before the Long Night. Peace could not possibly last, no matter how much Selyse and the Florents nudged and guided or downright snuffed out through Imry's work.

They stayed in the nursery until Selyse's expected appointment of the day arrived at the Foxhole.

"Thoros of Myr, be welcome," Selyse greeted him in High Valyrian.

"My thanks," Thoros replied also in High Valyrian. "Ah. Your husband is here today?"

"No work be doing today," Stannis replied in stilted High Valyrian. "Baby prince."

"A new prince born? So that is why the bells rang. That is news indeed," Thoros said.

They sat and conversed. Selyse has been practicing with Stannis but she needed a native speaker and somebody further educated in proper High Valyrian to keep her own fluency levels up. This is where Thoros has proven to be most useful. If they can give Daenerys pause by speaking to her in High Valyrian, if Stannis can play her by stressing so-called fond memories of his grandmother Rhaelle, then they will do it.

In reality Stannis had the faintest memories of a stooped but still elegant lady, with silver hair and cool hands and a powdery scent of old fashioned perfume. Rhaelle had not spoken in conversation to any of her grandsons in High Valyrian, but Stannis could sing the first verse of a lullaby in High Valyrian perfectly and was reduced to humming the rest. Luckily, Thoros knew that song and he taught the entirety to Selyse so that she could teach it to Stannis.

That evening, Stannis rocked Armand and sang the song to him.

Brightwater Keep: Wedded Before a Heart Tree

The wedding preparations for Alekyne and Dacey went apace. Alekyne was a most solicitous betrothed and inquired to Dacey's preferences very often. She was encouraged to send for Bear Island women to serve as her entourage, however many she would like. She was given a tour of what would be their chambers at the Foxhole and any changes in furnishings would be hers to make freely. She was encouraged to let him know of her most favorite dishes to include in the feast. He wanted to have her favorite songs played for the dancing. And of course, every single one of the various fabrics produced by the Florent looms were available to her to make an entire new wardrobe suitable for the warmer southern climate.

Dacey could admit to herself that it was overwhelming. When she did think girlishly of a wedding for herself as a child, she had asked her mother what she wore, wanting some sort of romance.

A bearskin, Maege Mormont replied with a twinkle in her eye. And just that.

That was completely unhelpful, but Dacey did not mind it. Her mother was a willful, difficult person with bouts of rollicking, mocking humor. Which, incidentally, made her similar to the Florents. They did like a good tease and mock, only leavened with the Southerly flowery way. She did not think any but the youngest Florents would go about hiding inflated animal bladders underneath seat cushions like Maege did after butchering days; she did love the surprised shock that came from people sitting down only to jump back up when the bladders exploded with disgusting popping noises. Maege would roar with laughter, slapping her knees.

She had expected over time to don a Mormont green woolen gown, with black embroidery on the collar and sleeves, perhaps trimmed in vair (squirrels were never in short supply) and wearing the precious, ancient, polished bear claw necklace of her ancestors as adornment. It was a most impressive piece; 30 different claws of graduating size were strung on a strip of leather, separated by wooden beads carved with First Men runes. Her maiden's cloak would fasten over her shoulders with the crossed paws of a bear's pelt to form the collar, the fur heavy and full, a newly hunted specimen for the year, and the cloak itself would be more of that best green-dyed wool and the embroidered bear itself would have a bright polished bone bead eye and fierce white carved bone claws.

That was her expectation; wool and leather, fur and bone, perhaps some bronze medallion bracelets at her wrists. If she were wed in a spring or summer, a wreath of fresh flowers in her hair.

Now, she could expect better; silk from Essos, if it was her wish. Her thrifty Mormont sensibility recoiled from such extravagance; one bolt of silk could feed an entire village for a year or more. One bolt of silk was a fishing skiff! Two fishing skiffs! Absurd. Wasteful.

She was lucky that Lady Selyse understood. Dacey came to understand that Lady Selyse was ever sensible to costs and so shrewd, considering the costs to the benefits. They were Reacher

nobility; they were expected to wear their wealth on their backs, to show off and show up others at court. Dacey would not be surprised if she were to be trussed up like a goose in finery she had never seen before, all in the name of showing that despite the gossip about her and Alekyne, House Florent didn't care, House Florent had coin to spend, look at how House Florent is so very, very, very generous with the bride of the heir!

Clothes were not just clothes for nobility. It was merely that before all this, House Mormont could never afford to enter the arena on such terms.

Lady Selyse quickly put her at ease; no trussing up would happen. For perhaps the first time, through Florent influence, Crownlands nobles thought it smart to not look too rich. Comfort and freedom of movement was prized and luxury came in the form of interesting seams and cuts to the cloth, in draping, in the different combinations of colors and textures, in embellishments that did not get in one's way. Cloth of gold was all well and good, but it was notoriously heavy and well, not exactly something you could just toss at the laundresses, could you?

The ladies Florent had silk for their own wedding dresses and they could expect no less for a bride to the Florent heir. Yet Dacey could tell that silk was not to Lady Selyse's taste; the money could be put to better use. However, they would never let it be thought that House Florent scorned or slighted her, Lady Dacey Mormont. And not just for appearance's sake, either. The Florents liked her, all of them. Somehow, she is so lucky as to win the favor of her future goodkin without biting her tongue or conceding to hang up her shield and mace and to never wear armor or leathers again.

So they found a bolt of green silk for her and Lady Delena set to work with her sketching and Dacey gamely allowed both Delena and Selyse figure out how to make her stunning in appearance to all who may look upon her on the wedding day. Selyse asked her frank questions; what did she like the most about her own appearance? Did she have any insecurities? Did she wish to hide some aspect of herself?

Dacey was no fool. She was glad that she had grown into her looks, was blessed with the curves of a woman to go with her height. She might have inherited the more squat, solid, bear-like qualities of her mother instead of what she gained from her father. As it was, the only thing she rued about her appearance were the dark hairs that grew on her forearms; her own Mormont pelt. Men could be hairy; plenty of men looked like they were wearing sweaters permanently with their shirts off. But she did not like this of herself. No matter that her mother patted her head as a maid with pimples on her face and teary from the aches of a first moonbleeding and claimed that her hairy arms would help keep her warm during the winters.

It would be no trouble at all to have long sleeves for her dress, Selyse assured her.

And then Dacey found out about Selyse's little ritual every two weeks, where she apparently had a mustache she naturally grew on her upper lip removed by being pulled out all at once! Well!

She could do that!

Selyse asked her if she was sure often enough to begin to annoy Dacey. The other ladies of the Foxhole also looked perturbed, but as Selyse could bear it, (hah!) she would too. So Dacey let them slather her arms with that mixture of sugar and honey and she heartily regretted it when the first strip of cloth was torn away and Dacey flinched from the sudden pain, greatly unlike any hurt from the sparring yard.

“It washes off?” Selyse offered.

“No! Go on, I know what it’s like now!” Dacey clenched her fists.

And so she had her forearms cleared of hair and felt fine and dainty. It was the little things in life.

The dress was draped and cut on the bias, making her figure known, but not tightly, not like Selyse’s preference. The silk skimmed her body and they made the narrow sleeves end at her elbows, to suit her newfound confidence with her arms bared. She was used to high-necked northern dresses, with decorative fabric knotting or the heavily embroidered padded collar that kept one warm. Here in the South, it was warm enough that such considerations were not necessary. She sat in the Foxhole’s sewing room with Selyse and the other ladies in only her undergarments, while Selyse and Delena draped and moved a cotton sheet up and down, trying to find an attractive place for the neckline to fall. Dacey protested when one iteration scandalously revealed the uppermost inch of her cleavage.

“Well, it is attractive,” Selyse casually moved the cotton sheet back up to cover it up. “On me, at least. But then you’ve got more bosom.”

Dacey resisted her instinct to pull the fabric up to her chin. She had already understood that the fabric had to sit somewhere below her collarbones. But it would not do to go further, she thought. No, that made her feel too vulnerable, too exposed. She thought it a little strange that Selyse was so confident as to have her feast gowns have necklines that dropped that sharply to her breastbone. On the other hand, with her small bosom, it was not as if she risked exposing herself. She could afford to be daring. Dacey was bold but she would not dare.

They settled on the neckline, making it so that it would look well with the bearclaw necklace that Dacey expected her mother to bring down South.

The seams of the dress were given bright orange piping and the skirt’s inset panels were the Florent blue. Selyse took out her own wedding dress for Dacey to look at, putting it on and spinning in it, reliving her dances with Stannis. Dacey admired the sparkling faceted beadwork, but balked when informed that should she like it, she could have beadwork as well of faceted emeralds. Imagine that, her wearing emerald beadwork! Dacey would not do it and spent time with her mother and other Bear Island women come south for the wedding embroidering the dress instead in the Northern fashion. Her mother wanted to have a big snarling bear’s head on the back of Dacey’s dress, to show all the Southroners that no matter the removal of her maiden’s cloak, she would always be a Mormont. Dacey put her foot down; she was not some woman stolen by a wildling and she had no need to threaten anybody of her future husband’s family. They settled on more subtle black thread embroidered bears’ pawprints, a pair on her shoulders and smaller prints winding tracks at her waist and at her skirt’s hem. She did allow for glittering onyx beads (Baratheons always

had a store of those at the ready for their seamstresses) to be incorporated into the embroidery.

Alekyne gifted her a brooch, her first piece of gold and gemmed finery in her life. She still marveled that it was all hers alone and felt self conscious of the flashing glint of it at the corner of her eye when she fastened it to the breast of her jacket in the mornings still.

It was a sitting bear, facing forward, the body a single oval faceted emerald. The emerald itself was a heady fifteen carats in weight, bracketed by the two long forelegs of the bear. The head and forelegs were finely wrought gold and the eyes of the bear were a pair of rubies. Beside the bear, leaning cheekily against one big foreleg, was a fox, the pointed nose looking upwards at the bear. It was also wrought gold with topaz eyes and the tip of the tail that curled over the bear paw was inset with many little diamonds.

Her mother and the other women from Bear Island gasped when she showed them her gift.

“Well isn’t that something!” Maege gently held it in her open palm, tilting it to catch the light. “What a pretty green! What kind of rock is this?”

“Emerald, Ma, it’s emerald.”

“Hmm,” Maege tapped the fox. “Your betrothed sends a fine message, I think. He could have given you something that was all Florent. But wearing this, there’s no question you are Mormont first.”

Maege was apt to think that the Florents were a mite too smile-y for her tastes. But on the other hand there was a refreshing lack of pompous Southron airs about them when she did meet. She had been entirely unprepared for a raven from Jorah informing everybody that her Dacey had caught a Florent. She had a vague idea that perhaps her eldest would find a match; that was why they packed her off with a feast gown for the journey, of course. But a hope that Jorah would approve of whatever man Dacey may or may not meet and catch was one thing. The man in question was another. A Florent! She would think that Jorah was having a laugh at her, except that to waste a raven’s flight was something he would never do.

She journeyed south and when it was time to formally meet the Florents, decided to wear her chainmail for the occasion. Best show them what they are all in for with Mormons as goodkin, hah! There were no pursed lips or looks of dismay, however. Maege glanced at Jorah, who had a studiously patient look on his face. Oh, so he warned them of what she might do. Spoiling all her fun, that Jorah.

She stuck her hand out in greeting to Alekyne and when he took it to bow his head over her hand, she slid her grip forward to encompass his hand in a punishing squeeze as a quick test. He smiled and squeezed back just as hard. They stared at each other for perhaps a minute before Maege conceded with a bark of a laugh and she stepped forward in good spirits, liking him immediately for not crying out or hesitating, and pinched his cheeks.

But men of a family were one thing. She was out to see what sort of daughters the Florents produced and Dacey would be expected to raise. So she was prepared to sit in a sewing room and to listen, ill as she liked it, to take their measure. She was very pleasantly surprised

indeed to find other activities took up the days of Lady Selyse Baratheon and Lady Delena Florent.

First of all, every other day, trusted ladies (including Lady Lysa Arryn! Imagine that! Wife of the Lord Hand!) met in Selyse's parlor, the furniture was pushed to the side and padded cotton mats laid out. From there, dressed simply in tunics and loose short trousers, they did morning exercises that Maege had never seen before; mostly laying on the mats. She wouldn't have thought such exercise counted, but even she felt burn as they did leg lifts and curls and what Selyse called The Hundred. This was all well and good but boring.

And then Maege found out that they played soccer and hammerball! Well! That was more like it. Not at all like a good spar but definitely worked up a sweat. She observed that there were scant few other ladies at King's Landing who ventured to join the Florents in their games. Maege expected some ill willed gossip about the matter. There were some mutterings, but Maege quickly learned that the cackling, earthy, unapologetically lusty-about-her-husband Selyse of the Foxhole was not what Lady Selyse showed to court. In court she adopted a cordiality with a sheen of iciness, her face smoothed to studied neutrality. She was... cautious. And Maege was canny enough to understand that this was necessary, that something somehow about the Royal court put her on guard. That did not mean that she or Delena had changed in particular; it was merely that they held their tongues and tamped down their emotions. Other than the common gossip about the more robust than usual sexual relations with her husband, there was an air of unimpeachable correctness about the Lady Selyse, kept from being seen as completely boring by Selyse's enjoyment of dancing and singing.

Maege and Dacey talked about it as they worked on the maiden cloak and wedding dress. As far as they could observe the Florents took measures to avoid the notice of the Queen. Not the King. Not the Hand. Just the Queen. They could not see why, unless it was by avoiding Cersei they also avoided the notice of Lord Tywin. It seemed to make sense, as far as any Southron court nonsense made sense to Maege and Dacey. The Florent women made sure to subordinate themselves to Queen Cersei, were careful of what they said about her at court itself, and never made their gowns as flashy as hers nor tried to vie with her with their jewelry. Dacey revealed that even though Cersei was known to approach the King with various appointments for Western nobles at court, no Lannister yet sat at the Small Council nor any of their more notable bannermen. And after learning who was actually on the Small Council it was interesting that the Florents had not pushed for more than Ser Axell's position as a bureaucrat within the Master of Coin's offices.

Maege thought it a wise sort of caution, herself. It wouldn't do to fail at learning the lessons about overreaching ambitions when it came to Reacher families as the Hightowers. And one of theirs was Queen once! Jorah and Maege discussed this; it was clear that Dacey was being politely blocked from full knowledge of Florent doings until after her marriage. Was this something that would bode ill?

Jorah reminded Maege of the gifts bestowed upon Bear Island. There was a levelheaded generosity, not foolish openhandedness as old Lord Tytos Lannister. No gold, but supplies that they sorely needed. If they squandered such gifts it would be only to their detriment. Everything they did made sense, Jorah thought. Surely the only secrets were on how much

and how far they were along on their various inventions and research; and for that he would not blame them for secrecy when Dacey could call off the wedding up until the official final words of the traditional vows.

The guest list was daunting. Delena's friendship with Lady Lysa meant that the Lord Hand himself would be in attendance. King Robert had to regretfully decline, as it would not do that have both the King and Lord Hand out of the court at the same time. It was well, however, because of course Lord Stannis and Lord Renly would be in attendance, which meant some of the more prominent Crownlands Houses would also be attendance, and Stormlands banners as well, trying to be more acquainted with Lord Renly. Of course Lord Tyrell as Lord Paramount was invited and where he went, it could be expected that his mother would harangue Redwynes and Hightowers to go also, to show strength. Which would be countered by the presence of Lord Tarly and the more warsome marcher lords. On a more familial and pleasant note, the Royces would be making the trip; Alekyne wished for Selyse, Melessa, and Rhea to sing at the ball.

Jorah and Maege carefully sent out ravens. Lord Stark was invited, though there was certainly no hope of him making an appearance, not when he was not at the Ship Launch. But it would not do to simply not do so. Lord Glover was invited as was proper for goodkin to the family. Various other mountain clan nobles were invited, as they did provide daughters for marriage to the Mormonts and vice versa in the past. Not so grand as the guests from the Florent side, but humble and familiar. It would have to do.

Dacey and Maege were making the finishing touches to Dacey's maiden's cloak one afternoon when Lady Lysa bustled into Selyse's parlor, holding a raven message in her hand.

"Selyse! Oh, Selyse, I have such news!"

She handed it to Selyse, who began to read. Maege and Dacey looked on.

"Huh."

Lysa had gracefully collapsed into a chair looking excitedly out of sorts.

"Isn't it awful?" she asked.

"Lord Hoster," Selyse looked at Maege and Dacey. "Wishes to announce the happy news of a betrothal for his son Edmure to Lady Lynesse Hightower."

"Oooh!" Lysa exclaimed. "It's spite, that's what that was! I don't think she looked so fine as that during the Ship Launch and she wasn't a better dancer than Delena! But there were ever so many Hightowers there and Edmure probably let himself get boxed in, the foolish boy! I'm ever so disappointed!"

Selyse was silent, drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair.

"Lord Hoster's choice is not foolish," she concluded. "And considering the contentiousness of Riverlands lords, a bride from outside with a rich a dowry as a Hightower was quite the find."

“Delena would do,” Lysa sniffed. “She’s sensible! Oh, you’ve seen the richness of those Hightower gowns, that Lynesse will spend and spend and Edmure would let her, I expect. It will be a disaster.”

“Or, cause for Lord Hoster to take improving the income of his holdings more seriously than before,” Selyse countered with a smile. “With a big spender, perhaps Edmure can be made to be a bigger earner.”

“Perhaps,” Lysa sighed. “It’s just... Edmure wouldn’t heed me! Father was always making choices to maintain his position and since the Rebellion it has been all as he wanted from Catelyn and I, but he won’t heed my advice when I write from King’s Landing. I’m not a stupid little girl child, you know! Why shouldn’t the Riverlands prosper directly by marriage to your family? But no, let him get hoodwinked by an ally of the Tyrells, of all things!”

“Are the Tyrells very hated in King’s Landing?” Dacey asked.

“Stannis and Renly do,” Lysa replied. “I don’t, but I shan’t go out of my way to aid them, either.”

“We would prefer that Tyrells are not... obstacles in the way. But, seeing as Lord Mace is Lord Mace, our preferences do not matter,” Selyse diplomatically stated.

“Oh, tosh, Selyse,” Lysa giggled.

“Even a fool for a Lord Paramount has his uses,” Selyse grinned.

The wedding at Brightwater Keep was splendid. Let Lord Florent and Lady Selyse ponder the ramifications of the marriage alliances of the high lords. For Alekyne and Dacey, this day was one of hope and joy for the both of them.

Jorah grasped Dacey’s hand before leading her towards the Heart Tree, taking a few moments to gruffly say that had he a daughter, he would have hoped she would be as fine a woman as Dacey grew up to be. She smiled and kissed his cheek before placing her hand to his elbow and they began walking out.

The assembled lord and ladies were waiting at the Heart Tree.

“Who comes before the Old Gods?” Lord Alester Florent called out.

“Dacey, of House Mormont,” replied Jorah. “comes here to be wed. A woman grown, trueborn and noble. She comes to beg the blessing of the Gods. Who comes to claim her?”

“Alekyne, of House Florent, heir to Brightwater Keep. Who gives her?”

“Lord Jorah of House Mormont, who is her uncle.”

“Lady Dacey, do you take this man?” Alester asked.

“I take this man!” Dacey called out, her voice strong.

She stepped forward to Alekyne. He undid the clasp to her cloak and lifted it off, passing it to Jorah. He undid his cloak, so very finely made out ermine, to drape securely over her shoulders. They held hands, facing the Heart Tree. The quizzical face looked down upon them, as if asking if they were very sure about their vows. They knelt and lowered their heads in prayer.

“Live long and prosper,” Selyse whispered under her breath.

King's Landing: Changes Upon Changes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

King's Landing was now in a constant state of construction. As each of the Gates were excavated and the wildfire removed, the Florents convinced Robert that he might as well improve King's Landing properly.

An aqueduct begun up the Blackwater Rush, that would cross through the lands of multiple lords, required quite the negotiation by Lord Hand Arryn, but Jon was more than capable of the task. Eventually, fresh water from afar would be piped into King's Landing and into multiple fountains, cisterns, and would feed public bathhouses. The sourcing for stones to build the aqueduct itself might have been even more of a challenge and cost, except that Selyse carefully suggested to Lysa to write to her kinswoman Lady Shella Whent about allowing the Crown to use Harrenhal as a quarry; the stones were all cut to size already and easily chipped free from mortar instead of hewn from bedrock. Lady Shella Whent thought it reasonable; she did not use more than the bottom floors of two out of the five great towers anyway. Too many ghosts. A fair price for the stones was negotiated and furthermore, Harrenhal was so massive that the workers themselves could live in a tower's ground floor as they dismantled it from the top.

King Robert himself campaigned for guard towers that also were semaphore towers to be built alongside the aqueduct, since they did not lack for cut stones, for the posting of rotating troops of Gold Cloaks to patrol the aqueduct, even into Riverlands territory. It was argued that it would be foolish to not prepare for attempts to illegally tap into and poach the water or potential sabotage during future wars. As the aqueduct served the people of King's Landing, it was right that there should be King's Landing men to patrol it. Robert understood clearly the vulnerability of an aqueduct to concentrated siege weapons fire.

The old Queen's Fountains were also refurbished. And here, even Robert was aghast at what was discovered once the workers began excavating, following the flow of water. Originally, only particularly licensed inns or laundries could tap into the flow of water that entered these fountains to ensure adequate water levels. It was found that over time various private citizens and entities had illegally tapped into the water, taking them from the commons and then also having the gall to flush soapy washwater into what was supposed to be drinking water or even waste. No wonder the fountain waters were unfit for drinking! But drink from the fountains the small folk of King's Landing must.

News was freely spread of these terrible lawbreakers and punishments were levied and these illegal connections were closed off.

Selyse scoffed at the idea of merely four fountains being adequate for the growing city. The original four cisterns that fed the fountains were well maintained through tradition and their locations uphill made for adequate pressure. After investigating and learning from local elders that the Queens Fountains never dried up, it was judged that joining up subsidiary cisterns to the fountains would not be necessary at this time. The original four fountains were

traditional circular basins with central spouts emerging from statues; marble likenesses of Good Queen Alysanne held water vessels that were perpetually pouring water.

The basins were changed from their formerly simple layout. Each fountain now had three different basins. The first was freshest and for taking drinking water from. The second caught the overflow of the first basin and was oblong in shape and allowed for passing horses, oxen, or other livestock to drink, and finally the last basin was for smallfolk to rinse soapy laundry, with sloped, carved ridged interior side walls that allowed for even the poorest persons to adequately scrub their clothes.

Newer cisterns were built on the hills of King's Landing. Until the aqueduct was completed, they would be filled over time with rainwater.

The old existing sewer and drainage system from Jaehaerys I was getting cleared and cleaned out, and slowly being expanded. This was judged necessary to prevent flooding and turning the streets into mud and muck by the hooves of livestock and horses churning manure into the dirt as they passed. As these sewer lines were built out, with many streets being dug up and opened, new drinking water fountains were installed to the new cisterns. The new fountains were not the open basin types of the old Queen's Fountains. Instead, they were simple, cast iron faucets that had a constant, small stream of water. Enough to quickly cup your hands under for a drink, or wash your hands or face. People could take buckets or pitchers to collect their daily water. The many new little fountains being installed in new places throughout the city, were very welcome.

Thoros of Myr was also useful in that Alekyne befriended him and gave him access to such finer quality Reach wines (in moderation) such that he would freely move amongst the Essosi delegations and feigning his usual drunkenness and pretending to doze off in their vicinity, overhear their discussions in Valyrian and report back. There was news of unrest, which Alekyne passed on to Stannis. Stannis took note and waited in Small Council for Varys to report on the growing distrust from the delegates or not. When Varys does his job, it was a good opportunity to have Robert concerned about more improvements to the Royal Fleet to make ready against incursions from pirates or sellsails. Which meant more recruits for Robert to train and oversee (keeping him well motivated and physically fit) and more troops of Marines for Stannis to deploy, and more funding for more ships and weapons and generating more demand for the tin jarred provisions. Profits of which get fed into the ever growing Florent enterprises. Which were working more and more to tip the balance against the Essosi in a trade war they were completely unprepared for.

Tyrion, Alekyne, and Selyse worked together and before he left for Casterly Rock, they finalized a water flushing jake. Selyse privately gave some clue to Stannis of her previous life as a smallfolk; she mentioned that it was actually very lucky that she had experience living in an apartment with a negligent landlord, which rather forced her to make small home repairs by herself. Including a malfunctioning toilet, which was her word for the thing. So she knew entirely how it ought to be built.

Tyrion was only on the part where he could tap into the various existing water pipes connecting to cisterns built long ago at the very top of the Rock, that caught rainwater, in order to install faucets where one could fill a bucket and tip water down the jake to move

waste along. He had the idea to use the principles of siphoning and liquids blocking air, so he would use a bowl with a s-bend pipe extending out the bottom. It prevented stink rising up from the existing jakes and one could just pour in more water into the bowl and the siphon action would suck the waste out. And then you'd have to replace water to previous levels to block off the s-pipe once more. It was serviceable, but needed a little more finessing.

It was a very good start indeed. Selyse added a small cistern attached to the bowl, with a flush valve to release water into the bowl directly after use and a fill valve to refill the little cistern and would stop the inflow of water with a glass float to turn it off at sufficient fill level. Alekyne had his workshop throw together a working prototype and it was a go. Once Tyrion finished his work remediating the pipes and sewers at Casterly Rock, Lord Arryn wanted him to see to getting a sufficient number installed at the Eyrie. If any other castle in the Westeros could do with flushing jakes instead of chamber pots, it was the Eyrie. Robert was convinced to have the Red Keep entirely renovated with flushing jakes; he certainly wanted his immediate environs as stink-free as possible.

Which meant that as a form of fashion and comfort, as well as sanitation, the Flushing Jake was worth establishing factories for, as well as an entire new network of merchants and plumbers for the business. The people of King's Landing were very used to collecting their urine and waste in barrels by now, however. The poorest smallfolk of Fleabottom even benefited by a guaranteed few pennies a day for the contents of their overnight chamber pots. There were a few enterprising urine collectors who saw the worth in getting full barrels as quickly as possible and going into Fleabottom and paying pennies to fill them up and then setting out by afternoon to their client fulling mills outside of King's Landing.

The sheer size of the Florent interests is almost beyond Stannis' abilities to keep track, so wide a net they are weaving. It was getting so that they had to hire executive officers for each of their associated companies and interests; educated men from lower Houses or even well established merchant families. Especially experienced merchant families who knew by experience the worth of a profit and loss statement and who grasped immediately the value of double-entry bookkeeping. Tyrion was correct in his analysis of what the Florents were planning to do in regards to the fabrics industry. Only he could not possibly know the scope of otherworldly dimensional knowledge that Selyse spent years writing down that she was now able to reverse engineer using the time and funds of the Florent enterprises.

Selyse had brainstormed alone for days, ransacking her accumulated notebooks in the Foxhole for anything she could remember about player pianos, music boxes, and punch cards for the computers from 'Hidden Figures' and 'Desk Set'. From this, she came up with punch cards to 'program' patterns for looms to weave. She set Rhea on the task and her cousin did not disappoint. First came the looms capable of weaving polka-dotted patterns out of Rhea's workshop in Runestone. The patterns were new and charming and declared stylish and quickly entered into merchants' hands.

And since she had figured out how music boxes worked anyway... King's Landing introduced music boxes, where new small factories began to be set up to preserve the shorter, more popular tunes for later listening entertainment. The boxes themselves came in great variety. The cheapest examples were plain wooden boxes. If one had more coppers to spend, one could have painted boxes or carved lids. Inlay patterns became popular and if one was

very bent on showing off, you could have yours made out of metal and decorated with jewels or filigree as you liked and could have interchangeable song cylinders at that!

Erren in the meantime was taking hanks of cotton and wool threads and boiling them in all sorts of substances, just to see what would happen. He hit upon boiling cotton threads in a solution of lye that resulted in better dye acceptance and a sheen that was almost satin-like. The dyed cotton cloth from this was cheaper than satin, but attractive and once again, fueled by new dresses worn by Lady Lysa and Selyse and ladies at court who followed their lead, reported upon in the King's Landing Spectator, caused a boom in demand from the dressmakers and tailors serving nobles and the richer merchants and tradespeople from King's Landing to Lannisport, from Oldtown to White Harbor. This set the dyer's guilds at Brightwater Keep's holdings ablaze with activity.

Rhea's ambition was such that immediately after she could get her hands on sufficient amounts of Errenized spools of thread, she produced a brocade, based on a pattern that Delena drew out, commissioned by Selyse. Brocade! Produced in a matter of weeks using a programmed, waterwheel-driven loom running day and night when normally such rich fabric took the better part of a year, and made from imported Essosi silk at great cost! Selyse craftily asked Delena to draw out a pattern that would appeal to the likes of the Lannisters. Selyse would critically eye the sketches Delena gave her, muttering to herself mysterious phrases such as, 'More. More Versace. Dolce and Gabbana all up in here. Baroque up the wazoo. More!' and the results were muscular leonine feline shapes leaping or lounging amongst wreaths of fern and leaf fronds, flowers, and ostentatious curlicues, blaring yellows on red. Rhea nearly set out to visit the Foxhole in person from Runestone to yell at Selyse for commissioning such a thing that had her nearly cross-eyed punching out the pattern on cards.

But the results were incontestable. The fabric looked rich! Bolts of it were produced and Robert gifted them to Cersei with great aplomb. She was enamored and made use of it immediately, for a new cloak and matching gown and finally found herself reported in the King's Landing Spectator, to her immense gratification; she had privately thought whoever was doing the Spectating didn't know proper taste at all, concentrating mainly on Lady Lysa and Lady Selyse! Tyrion would laugh to himself once he saw the bolts showing up at Casterly Rock, where fist fights nearly broke out amongst his family to get their hands on a cloth that was finally good enough for them; no mere stripes, dots, zigzags, or herringbones! He allowed for a cloak of it to be fashioned for himself; can't be seen as not being fashionable, after all. He much preferred going about in his solid color Florent Jackets. Even Tywin could not resist; he took lengths of the brocade to be used as a sash and as a fresh lining to his favorite cloak. Otherwise, the brocade bolts were so many, so wide and long, that they could fashion pillows, curtains, bedspreads, even upholster furniture with the stuff! Tyrion could picture Alekyne cackling and rubbing his hands together at the way the Lannisters at large were clamoring for his House's product. What surely was best of all is the knowledge that the Lannisters didn't know where the cloth came from. Most nobility didn't; they commissioned clothing through private dressmakers and tailors, who bought bolts from drapers, who in turn bought from large warehouses of other middlemen situated in the Reach.

When Lord Alester and his wife Lady Melara had cause to visit Highgarden and schmooze with the Reacher lords who were closer to the Tyrells at a tourney, he arrived with a Florent-special brocade cloak and Melara with a brocade sash and insets to her gown; gamboling

foxes on fields of flowers and leaves. Unlike the Lannister need for showiness, Lord Alester much preferred Selyse's sense of chic by using different shades of blue instead for the whole fabric for a monochromatic pattern. They were approached immediately with questions about the bespoke pattern; did they have Essosi contacts and found commission with weavers in the east? What, these were Westerosi-made? No, really? Really!?

Lord Alester dramatically had a troop of liveried servants enter Highgarden's main hall with bolts of brocade in their arms that would seduce the Tyrells; in lush greens and yellows, some monochromatic like his own brocade, some in high contrast like for the Lannister print, roses in bloom, roses in bud, vining roses criss-crossing like a briar, one pattern had entire bouquets of roses, framed by curling ribbons, all rendered in shiny Errenized thread.

"A gift," Lord Alester purred at the Tyrells. "A demonstration of how superior Westerosi make is in comparison to slaving barbarians of Essos."

They snapped it all up, hook, line, and sinker. All the lords present began asking how to get their own brocades of such make.

Entire new, once again, heavily guarded weaving factories sprang up at Brightwater Keep, Horn Hill, and Runestone, specializing in brocades. Soon enough Delena began to need subordinate artists of her own to fulfill the commissions from various noble Houses, who would refine the sketches and send the drawings to the brocade factories, where specialized laborers converted them onto punch cards for the looms to work on. Selyse also wisely helped her design innocuous brocades with slightly simpler leaves, flowers, birds, butterflies, and curling ribbons or braid patterns to produce for the merchant and tradespeople smallfolk who read the King's Landing Spectator aspirationally, wanting to know and copy the latest court styles.

The punch card mechanism of course also worked for larger, heavy-duty wool looms and soon enough, with the better grades of steel coming from the Royal steelworks, they would engineer a gripper system to pluck up weft to allow sharp steel blades to cut a tufted pile. Westerosi carpets entered the markets to immediate popularity. This time, Storm's End got first crack at setting up the factory as wool mills were already at work, thanks to Renly taking his future seat as Lord of Storm's End seriously. They did not attempt to copy the truly fine detail and make of Myrish carpets; they went for robust geometric patterns that appealed to the more practical and simple tastes of the Stormlands. Which also appealed to the tastes of Northerners. Which was the big, untapped market that the Florents were raring to charge into. The Manderlys quickly moved into position and with their connections with the Woolfields, entered into licensing contract agreements (Selyse crowed at the acceptance of the idea by the practical Northerners) and began setting up Florent-style wool mills and factories, managed by senior trained workers sent on by the Florents. Carpets remained a Storm's End exclusive for now, but it was sensible to have North-made woolen yarns and cloth widely available.

The Myrish delegates were howling with indignation once the laceworks got set up. They were not so fine in make of course, but what did it matter, when they were so cheap! It was slower to spread the trend for frothy lace-edged nightgowns, chemise, petticoats, and small clothes amongst noble ladies and then onwards into the growing merchant class of smallfolk of the harbor cities (since it was untoward to represent such things in print for advertisement),

but once it happened, it sealed a market that Myr could not enter. Eventually, the cheap Westerosi lace would edge commoners' handkerchiefs, become doilies and tablecloths, and other common household fabric trims. The Myrish were so distressed that they demanded that the factories churning out imitation carpets, lace, and other such stuffs be shut down as theft of Myrish works. King Robert boomed back at them that there could not be any such theft; these Westerosi-made products were clearly simpler, dare he say, not as luxurious in make as true Myrish work. What could they have to complain of? The local small merchant wanting a warm carpet underfoot in his bedroom would never have afforded a Myrish carpet anyway!

They had no ready answer for that. They had no idea the value of sheer volume at lower price points. Not like Selyse.

The other Essosi representatives (except for the Braavosi) were very nervous indeed. The only relief was that there couldn't possibly be any way that the spices, tea, and silks particularly of the east could be replicated in Westeros. Selyse privately snickered to Stannis after a report by Thoros; she knew the secret of silk very well.

"If you want to really set off a war with Essos, have Robert pay Varys to send infiltrators into Yi Ti. Have them steal silkworm eggs."

"Silkworm?" Stannis raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. Larvae of the silk moth. They feed only on mulberry leaves and their cocoons are the thread that is silk. Of course, if Yi Ti is like the civilization that first cultivated silk of my world, they do not hesitate to kill those who would enter the silkworm farms to steal the cocoons. Of course. They were worth their weight in gold."

"The effort would distract from the War, then."

"Yes."

By the time the Acclaim returned from Braavos, with spices and tea, Erren was already making the Florents a new favorite with the Redwynes, indeed. Sulfur powder sprayed upon growing grapes got rid of powdery mildew, saving harvests. Of course Redwyne ships began going directly to Dragonstone for the sulfur mined there. For fairness (and more profits for Dragonstone), the technique was released to the Dornish as well. The boom in grape yield set the stage for Erren to publish and spread the news and great potential of distilling wine for more complicated liquors. Of course Bellflower Press was also doing brisk business selling books on how to get more compost for increasing crop yields faster with biogas digesters and the benefits of harnessing the methane for cooking. The friendly competition between these winemaking regions flared up as they began competing on brandies and cognacs, fine enough to whet the tastes of Essosi. Needless to say, the Tyroshi delegates were most put out that their pear brandy had such competition.

The success of the Acclaim legitimized the Iron Islands Trading Company. Lord Rodrik immediately petitioned Stannis to release certain better navigation instructors from the Royal Fleet to establish a school at Harlaw to teach reading, writing, and mathematics as a foundation for teaching navigation, which was speedily approved. The school was filled

quickly by aspiring Ironborn youngsters, entranced by the tales of fine sailing from the returning crew and the crowing of Aeron Greyjoy. Yara and Theon were enrolled themselves. The Royal Shipyard went to work, building out sister ships to the Acclaim.

The Acclaim set out once again laden with Florent cloth stuffs, Vale glass, Stormlands carpets, Lannister clocks, (Delena designed a rather adorable rounded lionhead logo for Tyrion's workers to stamp on the bottoms of the clocks, a lion with satisfied closed eyes as if purring and a smiling mouth), King's Landing music boxes, and Iron Island cameos, mother-of-pearl trinkets and pearls. Sophisticated Braavosi went mad for the merchandise; the Westerosi make guaranteed slave-free sourcing and it was all so much cheaper than expected for the quality. The Braavosi delegates were only too happy to be invited to the private dinners with Lord Hand Arryn, where he was carefully getting to know the Gulltown Arryns and discussed what would also be pleasing to the Braavosi markets.

By the time a new Master of Coin was named, a Hugh Arryn, Selyse settled on something none of the Free Cities were capable of producing themselves. Porcelain. These delicate translucent ceramics were imported at great cost from Yi Ti and as yet the only examples she had seen up close herself were a set of cups in the Red Keep that dated to the time of Corlys Velaryon, so rare were the intact specimens. As there were glassworks already within the Vale, the Arryns and Royces would oversee the factories. The mountains of the Vale revealed their own white gold; kaolin clay was available for mining and already powders of feldspathic rocks were used in glassmaking. New mines opened and kilns were being prepped. The Florents expected to have a time of experimentation; Selyse did not know the correct ratio of kaolin to feldspar herself, nor the correct firing temperature or duration. She did know, however (and as shown by the Yi Ti porcelain examples) that cobalt would make a beautiful blue for decoration before firing. A call for skilled potters went out and Selyse expected an industry as great as Meissen or Sèvres to emerge given time.

Alekyne finally made his breakthrough, beating out Erren in regards to the tin jars: he designed machines capable of making the double seam interlock between a tin can body and lid. Dacey was quite bemused by the howling, fist pumping, and jumping up and down of the Florents at the Foxhole over the matter. Even Stannis was excited, though he expressed this by silently smiling all the way with both sides of his mouth. From there, the Florents could produce absolute industry game changers in food preservation. Obviously, they also funded the opening of a can opener factory. The existing tin jarring factory would still make jars and lids; they would be sold for civilian use for private canning or as receptacles for all sorts of household and kitchen goods, as they were rodent and vermin proof. A second proper tin can factory would be built and opened.

Canned baked beans were immediately added to the supplies for the Royal Fleet. Evaporated milk was immediately popular and released for civilian purchase, after sufficient quantities were distributed to the Royal Fleet supply depots. Milk usually had to be sold in a day and the herds immediately around King's Landing produced bad milk from poor quality fodder. The milk often required adulteration to make it look more like milk. It was sold in bulk in open barrels in crowded, open air markets and transported to market in uncovered containers on the back of a horse-drawn wagon, exposed to road dust. It made people sick more often than not. Milk with a shelf life of months, perhaps a year, clean, of better quality? Sold with great clamor when available.

Finally, sliced fruit could be added to the meals of sailors of the Royal Fleet. Selyse had Stannis to convince Robert to order Pycelle to send out ravens to all the North and Iron Islands Houses, to inquire as to the fruits they most missed during winters. Rhea happily conducted full immersion boiling bath tests and they began rolling out canned peaches and cherries, which were of course made available for Northern and Iron Islands markets.

All this was well and good, but did not satisfy Selyse.

The fact of the matter was that there was a limit to how well they could make steel with the heat of charcoal or even coal. Tobho Mott's skills with access to waterwheel power were formidable, but Selyse was often heard to say that 'Quantity has a Quality all its own'. Stannis could only imagine that she meant to arm and armor each and every able-bodied man in Westeros. The amount of steel that would require was beyond his imagination. Yet, it was as simple and difficult as that.

Alekyne had experimented so extensively with his steel wheeled bow that Selyse and he came to the conclusion that it was simply too rigid and heavy for prolonged use in wartime situations. If he, who had multiple prototypes made to his personal specifications, could not tolerate the fatigue in his arms that came from holding the bow, it would not do, despite the clear advantages of range, accuracy, and speed of arrow flight. When on the hunt, his arrows were quite perilous against deer that didn't know what was coming. Selyse was less sanguine about the chances of getting an obsidian tipped arrow past a White Walker if they couldn't literally rain down arrows upon them.

Control was everything; there was a reason why the wildfire was being placed on barges slowly floated out in the Blackwater Bay at a suitable distance away in the middle of night and the longest range scorpions the Royal Fleet had would fire flaming bolts at the barges from a ship to ignite the barge. Stannis saw it as a perfectly acceptable training exercise for his scorpion crews and a way to toughen them up. Ser Jaime and Thoros had to oversee the process; it was absolutely too tedious to try disposing of it one gallon at a time, yet they surely didn't want a baywide conflagration. So small barges it was, a few barrels at a time.

At absolute worse case scenario, they could use scorpions emplaced at the top of the Wall and laden with clay pots filled with white phosphorus (White phosphorus was the first new weapons-grade substance Erren discovered properly by himself after Maester Bryan and Selyse confirmed the existence of regular phosphorus when she was sixteen) and could just trust on the white phosphorus to explode and burn with exposure to air by the pots breaking open on impact. And if that didn't work, they would just need to use flaming scorpion bolts to start off and then the white phosphorus would go to work. Stannis was absolutely frightened that it was due to Selyse's encouragement that Erren seemed to have discovered another version of wildfire. Her response was that at least the substance was incapable of burning water. He was also amazed that Erren produced this substance from essentially ground up bones. It was the strangest idea that everybody was walking around with that combustible potential just... integral and inside of them.

More strange than that, Selyse insisted that the substance was a common and important component of agricultural fertilizers as well in her world. Stannis simply didn't understand; that stuff burns in air! Erren would grin at him and shrug; showing Stannis the chemical

notation for phosphoric acid would be as useful as showing him magical ritual spellbooks from Essos.

They needed more steel. They needed ways to smelt more metals on the periodic table to make new alloys; there were tons and tons of tailings from the Iron Islands, Dragonstone, from Royce holdings, even Casterly Rock that were judged useless because up to now, there was no way to get sustained heat hot enough to unlock the metal within. After discussing with Erren and Alekyne, Selyse approached Stannis and informed him that they were simply going to have to do what she had not thought necessary until now.

They were going to harness lightning. Electricity, to reach the higher temperatures required for smelting new metals.

Stannis is very sure it would all end in death and destruction. Selyse made a wry grin and said they could only hope. Alekyne just silently rubbed his hands while Erren cackled like the fearless maniac who played with dangerous substances that he was. It is most disconcerting.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! I have no more buffer chapters at this time, so my posting will necessarily slow down as I work out further plot developments. Thank you so much for your patience and continuing to read!

King's Landing: It's a Nameday

“Oooh, Gods be good,” Lysa moaned, shifting to her side. This latest pregnancy was the furthest along yet and she was cautiously hopeful. Her weight gain was greater than before, her belly distended further than before. These were all good signs, surely. Take it day by day, Selyse advised and Lysa tried to do so. To not fret; fretting caused a fear in the blood and the fear could strangle a growing babe within. She would go to the nearest chapel within the Red Keep and sit and contemplate The Mother. Not pray. Prayers haven’t done any good in the past. She sat and breathed slowly and evenly, seeking a feeling of peace. And hope. She would do this until she was forced by inevitable pregnant necessity to seek out the nearest privy, whereupon finishing, she would return to her chambers.

As her pregnancy progressed, every kick and movement she felt made her heart leap with fragile joy. Selyse and Delena visited every day and they went through breathing exercises together and otherwise kept her company. She was always glad to have Armand over for visits, to make him cackle with games of peekaboo or tickling his round tummy. At two years in age, his hair was coming in, solid black tufts haphazardly sprouting at only the back of his head. This unfortunate hair pattern made his resemblance to Stannis all the greater, though Lysa would never say so!

Lysa slowly levered herself upright and went to the privy yet again. She sighed, carefully leaning her elbows on her knees. She was so sleepy...! It was still dark outside. She got up afterwards and slowly made her way back to her bed. Just as she got in, a familiar, terrible pain struck.

“Oh-!” she whimpered.

Thirty six weeks-! It’s-! It’s too soon! Oh no!

Tears came to her eyes.

“Oh, oh please!” she began to breathe deeply. “False labor. Please!”

She waited, breathing steadily, listening to the ticking of the clock, her hands clenched in her blanket. The recurring pulses of pain did not go away, despite her waiting.

Well. She wiped her eyes. Well.

She reached out and tugged on the tassel rope that connected to a servants’ bell.

“Prepare the birthing chamber,” she informed them when they arrived. “I wish for the Head Midwife Alys to be summoned. I wish for Lady Baratheon and Lady Delena Florent... notified.”

“Shall we tell Lord Arryn...?”

“It is not as we have hoped,” Lysa said. “And it is very late. Let him sleep. And inform him in the morning, after this is over.”

She waited. She was changed into a smock, carried by stretcher to the birthing chamber, and she made her way over to the metal bed and laid on it. She listened to the ticking of the clock. She felt cold and far away. Breathe.

She looked up when there was a knock on the door. It was her friends! Selyse and Delena came in, also in smocks. How good it was to see them! They came despite the very late hour!

“Oh!” Lysa teared up.

“Shh, shh,” Selyse went over to take her hand. “It will be alright.”

“Thir- Thirty six-”

“I know,” Selyse nodded, while Delena rubbed her shoulder. “Not ideal. But there is still hope. Just breathe. Wait for Alys. We’re here with you.”

They waited. Alys and her assistants arrived and checked on Lysa’s dilation. It was not moving along too fast, judging from Lysa’s memories of when her labor pains began. That was... That was good. Selyse and Delena kept her company, bringing water for her to sip, reciting stories to distract her as she waited. She would’ve wanted to move and walk as Selyse was said to have done, but she was so large that it didn’t feel right. Selyse reminded her to only do what she wished.

She stayed on her side, while Selyse and Delena took turns rubbing her back.

The pain increased. It was just like all the other times before, only somehow, worse. Lysa breathed through it. It was the waiting that got to you, just as Selyse said. Let it pass.

Her water broke. That was a terrifying moment. No going back now-!

Alys was kindly and professional as ever.

“There you go,” she said encouragingly. “Just a little longer.”

When it was finally safe to push, Lysa had rolled onto her other side. Selyse was there, seated at the bedside, with Lysa’s leg braced on her shoulder. Selyse gripped firmly.

“Push when Alys says, alright?” Selyse smiled at her. “You can do it!”

Lysa nodded frantically.

Alys gave the order and Lysa bore down, with Selyse and Delena encouraging her to yell and breathe as she went. She huffed. She puffed. Delena wiped at her tears and sweat.

“Once more, milady, just got to get the shoulder-”

Lysa yelled.

“FIDDLESTICKS!” she shrieked. “POO!”

Selyse snorted through her nose.

“Come on!” Alys encouraged. “There- There- There-”

“POPPYCOCK!”

Through the haze of pain there was a sudden emptiness. Lysa slumped as Alys and her assistants busied themselves.

Lysa closed her eyes. Selyse carefully put Lysa’s leg down.

A series of small hiccuping noises caused Lysa to startle.

“Lysa!” Delena gripped her hand.

“It’s alive!” Selyse gripped her other hand.

Lysa burst into fresh tears.

Alys came over.

“Lady Arryn,” she bowed her head, while holding the washed infant out. “You have a son.”

Lysa reached out to hold him, still in a state of bewildered shock.

“Just the afterbirth now,” Selyse said.

Lysa nodded. And then frowned.

“It- It’s hurting again. Why-?”

Alys was carefully palpating Lysa’s belly.

“Twins, milady!”

“...What-!” Lysa gasped.

“Bring that bassinet here,” Selyse ordered. “Has anybody informed Lord Arryn!? Wake him! Wake him!”

Lysa had to let go of her son, so that he could be placed near her, in her sight as she braced and pushed again. She had thought she had not the energy to do more. But surprising herself, she labored on.

By the time Lord Arryn arrived, Lysa was holding her twins. A boy and a girl.

“My lord husband,” Lysa gave a watery smile.

“My lady wife,” Jon murmured, cautiously entering the room.

Selyse and Delena quickly made way and he went to Lysa's bedside. He sat down.

"Thank you," he said softly. "Thank you very much."

Lysa grinned and awkwardly wiped her eyes while still holding her babies.

"Would you like to hold one, my lord? Jon?"

"Yes," he reached out.

He carefully held one twin and looked at it with quiet wonder.

"It's your nameday, today," he whispered. "A very fine day indeed."

The news of Lysa surviving the birth of her twins, Roland and Elyse, filled the Red Keep with joy. Robert rushed in and his large presence was quite overwhelming, one moment patting Lysa's hand rapidly, one moment crushing Jon into a hug, another moment grinning down into the face of one twin or another, rocking them in his large hands.

"Playmates for Eddard!" Robert cheerfully boomed. "Imagine that! They'll have so much fun together!"

Lysa smiled behind a hand when Robert bobbled Elyse.

"And you, my little pretty one! How would you like to be a princess? Or queen? Eh?"

Lysa made a panicked look at Jon. So soon? The king would betroth her infant daughter?

"Now, Robert," Jon cautioned. "Please be sensible-"

"Oh, alright!" Robert handed Elyse to Lysa. "I know you, Lady Lysa. You would like a Florent-bred husband for your little girl, oho! Sammy Tarly? Armand? Little Allard Royce?"

"I do hope so, but everybody is full young, yet," Lysa demurred. "I would wish for them to find out if they suit, first."

Robert sighed wistfully.

"Makes sense. And it would be a different kind of fun, won't it? Balls and tourneys and soccer games and hammerball! Concerts and hunts, with all the young men showing off. She'll have poems and songs composed on her behalf, I shouldn't wonder. Makes me miss being young."

"King Robert, you are not old!" Lysa exclaimed.

Robert laughed.

"But I am a king! With all the worries, duties, and responsibilities. All of that would make anybody feel old!"

He held his finger out to Roland and the infant grasped it.

“But it shall be worth it all, if these young ones have the chance to grow and change the world too,” Robert concluded. “What things they might accomplish!”

Roland and Elyse inspired Robert to visit the Royal nursery every day.

He worked on being a more present father to his two sons. He bobbled Eddard. He wanted to see his first steps; made an official order of the nurse to let him know immediately no matter what; he would leave the Throne Room at a run if he had to. He cooed and babbled at Eddard, wanting to have his first words be Dada. He of course started trying Baby Sign Language.

With Joffrey, he gave him big bear hugs, swung him around by the arms or legs or tossed and caught him in the air, which had Cersei shrieking in alarm, but with Joffrey screaming with laughter. He put Joffrey on his shoulders and jogged around the training yard, with Joffrey again screaming with laughter. When he did throw tantrums, Robert would pick him kicking and yelling off the ground and hug it out. Joffrey would pout and sniffle until Robert stuck his tongue out at him and crossed his eyes and then Joffrey would laugh and try to do the same.

He also noticed that Joffrey was already getting arrogant in the precise way he disliked about Cersei. A mean, cutting cruelty to everybody else, even rudeness towards Lord Jon Arryn! No respect at all! His first instinct was to beat the boy; his own father did not flinch from using the paddle. But he consulted the Florents instead. Lord Florent was old-fashioned, but warned him that as mischievous as all the young Florents were, a paddle or rod might not be enough. A child already showing the worst of that Lannister arrogance would be more than a handful. Selyse advised something else, a Naughty Chair or Spot, whereupon Joffrey would be forced to sit still, unable to play or do as he wished, until he apologized for what he did and promised to improve his behavior.

Robert had not thought that would work. But on the other hand, he himself loathed sitting still, with nothing to keep his attention. It seemed logical (hah!) that his own son should despise it as a punishment and it was true; Joffrey threw himself out of the designated chair, howling and flailing. Robert picked him up each time, letting him kick himself into exhaustion, and placed him back on the chair.

“You will not throw your wooden blocks at the servants,” Robert admonished. “A good lord does not torment people who loyally serve. It is not seemly. Don’t be like a Targaryen. We’re better than that.”

Joffrey sniffled.

“Now. You will wait, until that middle sized clock arm goes around three times. Do you understand? Repeat back to me what I said.”

“I will wait until it goes ‘round three.”

“And you will apologize for throwing your toys at people.”

“And ‘pologize for throwing my toys at people.”

“Very good.”

Robert took a step back and waited along with Joffrey.

Joffrey kicked his legs and frowned, but did not attempt leaving the chair.

“Alright,” Robert knelt down. “Time’s up. Do you apologize?”

“Sorry for throwing toys.”

“There,” Robert hugged him. “You’re going to be good and not trouble the servants?”

“Yes.”

“Right. Up you get! Want to go to kitchens and see what tarts they’ve baked up today?”

“Yes!”

Cersei did not approve, of course, but Robert’s explanations to Joffrey, so simple that a child could understand, managed to affect her. In her own arrogance, she thought it right that her son should be better than the last ruling dynasty. And if even her oaf of a husband had the sense to think on kingly comportment, it wasn’t too bad.

Robert also tested Joffrey’s knowledge of numbers and letters and found that his education was sorely lacking. He was a five year old boy and could not even write his own name! Robert took deep breaths and went to question Cersei over the matter. She had excuses; that Joffrey had time, that Joffrey was bored, that Joffrey was smart, so he could learn it all later. Robert snorted at that and then, instead of starting a fight, retreated.

He, in a burst of cunning that had him chuckling evilly to himself (surely this was how Florents felt all the time!) wrote a letter to Lord Tywin Lannister, reporting that his own grandson was illiterate. And it was Cersei’s fault. He baldly stated that Cersei would not heed him on this matter, saying that as mother she knew what ought to be done and though by rights he could have her punished as King, it would not do for rumors to start about him being harsh to his Queen. He was humbly asking for advice on how to approach the Queen in a productive way over the education of the future king, his son Joffrey.

The response was as expected; trembling messengers from Casterly Rock showed up, holding letters for Jaime, Cersei, and Ser Gerion.

Do I have to do everything myself? Tywin wrote. Have you all no shame? A Prince of Lannister blood, illiterate? Is the boy wrong in the head? Why, even Tyrion, stunted as he is, could read by the time he was three! If he has difficulties with his letters the same as Jaime (and here Jaime rolled his eyes) then I will show up in person, to the Red Keep to teach Joffrey his letters. I did the task once, I could very well do it again!

“Oh gods, no, please,” Gerion put his copy down. “Sweet, dear, niece, who is Queen, please don’t let him come here!”

Cersei unwillingly laughed as Gerion prostrated himself on the floor and began ludicrously grasping at her ankles.

“Enough, Uncle!”

“Cersei, you must have Joffrey learned,” Jaime said next. “Surely you don’t wish to tax the hospitality of the Red Keep with dear Father’s presence?”

Cersei pouted.

“Why did he have to test Joffrey?” Cersei complained. “He doesn’t like reading! I’ve never seen him with a book, not once!”

“...King Robert might have the same sort of trouble with letters as I,” Jaime hesitantly said. “He does sit still well enough when he has books read to him. You do recall, he has readers for him for the longer reports, while he paces or goes on the treadmill. And he did think that new novel, *Castle in the Sky*, good, once it was read out entirely to him.”

“Oh, the King knows *Castle in the Sky*? I liked it a lot!” Gerion enthusiastically said after getting up from the floor.

“I liked it too,” Jaime volunteered.

Cersei sneered.

“Joffrey’s five, Cersei,” Gerion finally said. “It’s time. Why, how would he be a page, if he could not even sort through a basket of messages?”

“My Joffrey won’t be a page!”

Gerion raised his eyebrows.

“Is he not to be knighted? Really? I heard King Robert discussing it with his brothers. They plan for the princes to gain leadership experience. Perhaps as officers and then Commander in the Gold Cloaks, as Daemon Targaryen did. It is just as with Kevan, Tygett, and I; we serve your father best by commanding in his name. As knights. What do you think, Jaime?”

Jaime shifted.

He hadn’t thought of it. Cersei told him to never think of it, to not pay too much attention to Joffrey. So he didn’t.

“If Father and King Robert expect Joffrey to be educated to rule, isn’t that a good thing?”

Cersei’s eyes narrowed. Jaime suppressed a sigh. It was that Father AND King Robert wanted something of her and Cersei never wanted to do anything but what she wished, when she wished, how she wished.

“Will Joffrey be knighted?” Jaime finally asked.

“... Oh, very well,” Cersei sniffed. “But I do think he’ll be so very bored with lessons, you know.”

“Still better than Father,” Jaime shuddered. “Sitting right next to him, scolding him for every ink blot, every wrong line, every crooked loop, every-”

“Enough, Jaime,” Cersei flapped her hand at him.

Cersei didn’t like what happened next, but it was Robert’s idea and Joffrey seemed to be responding. It was Florent work, with their knack for singing and songmaking. In no time at all, Cersei was being annoyed by the court mummers assigned by King Robert for Joffrey’s daily lessons, which included the ABC Song, sung on repeat over and over and over! They were not to stop, until Joffrey could sing along as well. Mercifully, there was some variation, with songs about colors and numbers and rhymes.

Joffrey played learning games with Robert. They would race to match pairs of letters in a stack of cards with painted letters. Robert would show a letter to Joffrey and Joffrey would tell him what the letters were. Robert would arrange the cards into simple words to quiz Joffrey. Cat. Dog. Hat. Robert would hoist him onto his shoulders, which Joffrey liked best and Robert would walk around within the Red Keep, pointing at various things and asking what they were. Joffrey yelled out the names and then Robert would ask for the beginning letter of the word, or the color of it, or some other aspect.

Cersei begrudgingly participated; she would much rather be doing her regular Queenly activities. (Which were... lunches, teas, gossiping, occasionally arranging formal dinners) And if Robert was not available, one or the other of the Baratheon uncles would put in the time to be a part of Joffrey’s education. Cersei did not like that! So Ser Gerion was made to attend to Joffrey, and he certainly took to it with amusement, not at all scorning the idea of reciting rhymes and telling tales and singing songs.

This accelerated course of study, disguised as games and play, allowed for Joffrey to write out using a charcoal pencil a letter to Lord Tywin Lannister:

I Llk to eat cak and tarts. My nam is JOFREY.

Robert thought that the first letter ever written by Joffrey was charming and had Stannis and Renly look at it before having it sent off.

“It’s very good writing, isn’t it?” Robert beamed.

“Every T is properly crossed,” Stannis allowed.

“He’ll be ready for ink pens soon,” Renly diplomatically said.

Joffrey, watching them go over his work with wide eyes, puffed up at this praise. He was even happier when Robert allowed him to carefully press Robert’s signet ring to the wax seal to make it secure.

“Joffrey,” Stannis said. “We will be leaving now.”

“Good bye, Uncle Stannis,” the boy said, making a wave. “Uncle Renly.”

Stannis kneeled and held his arms open. Joffrey looked at Cersei. She made no move except to raise an eyebrow.

“I’m not a baby,” Joffrey informed Stannis.

“Hmm. And yet, I recall you hugged your mother during family dinner last night,” Stannis made a doubtful tone. “Did you grow up overnight?”

Joffrey wavered. Robert hid a chuckle behind his hand. Renly smiled. Finally, the child made his decision and went to Stannis to give him a parting embrace. He gave one to Renly as well.

“Be good,” Stannis said. “Do not trouble your nurse overly much. And remember what I said about throwing yourself on the floor and having tantrums.”

“We have the Fury, the Fury doesn’t have us,” Joffrey recited. “I know already, Uncle Stannis! Father says that too!”

Stannis nodded and patted Joffrey’s head before leaving with Renly.

“It’s a bit amazing, how much better that boy is with some actual manners,” Renly said, once they were safe in their litter.

“Depends on how long Robert can keep paying attention to him. Joffrey seems to... be in awe of him. To wish to impress him.”

Renly nodded.

“... Was. Was Robert like that with our father?” Renly finally asked.

Stannis swallowed.

“Oh, yes. Never heeded anybody as well as him. When Father stopped smiling, that’s when Robert knew he was really in trouble. He would straighten out, truly try, until he next forgot.”

Stannis thought for a moment.

“I remember when Father announced Robert’s fostering that Robert threw a great tantrum. He did not see the honor of it, of such importance, so rare a thing as fostering to as good a lord as Jon Arryn. He only felt... that Father was sending him away because of some disappointment. Some failing. Which is foolishness, as you know, because Robert was the favorite.”

Stannis shrugged.

“I was never offered any such fostering.”

Renly clucked his tongue in sympathy.

“Granted, most second sons aren’t. It’s just one of those things,” Stannis concluded. “I thought as a boy to be unfair, but in reality probably something else entirely.”

“Perhaps our parents, having sent Robert away, wanted to keep you close?”

Stannis was silent for a time.

“... I suppose. I wasn’t troublesome, as a boy. So it was easier.”

“I dare say that your son will not be as troublesome as Joffrey. And his mother is a Florent.”

Stannis huffed a small laugh.

“I don’t think Armand would be rude or violent, no. Selyse would never allow it. But troublesome? It’s only a matter of time.”

Renly laughed and agreed. They got out of the litter at the Foxhole and retired for the evening.

Dragonstone: Works of Fire

It was a few moons of reprieve before the big evacuation of the Red Keep for wildfire removal.

As Robert predicted, Cersei kicked up a giant fuss; she was adamantly not going to camp out on the tourney grounds for moons at a time! Surely, if it must be done, they could go to a proper castle to stay! Stannis quietly suggested to Robert that it would not be fair to burden some unfortunate Crownlands lord with the costs of housing and feeding the royal court for moons on end. Better a castle built for the purpose of ruling on a kingdom's scale.

Storm's End, perhaps? It was nearly empty now, with only the barest garrison and staff to keep it going. Only it was so far away. Which made Casterly Rock right out, not that any of the Baratheon brothers particularly wanted to be jammed in close quarters with Tywin Lannister. The Eyrie was also regretfully dropped as a consideration by Robert due to the distances; it was even less suitable as a place to hold central government. Harrenhall would hold them all more than adequately and was central, but Robert wasn't ashamed to admit that the entire place creeped him out tremendously. He was not afraid of anybody trying to kill him with normal weapons. Curses and hauntings, strange, unexplainable goings on in the darkness of the night? What did he know about combating such things? Nope, nope, he wasn't staying in a place that had curses and other such things going on. Better safe than sorry, that's what.

The court would go to Dragonstone, Robert decided, since Summerhall was in ruins. It was as good a choice as it could be; four days of careful sailing away from King's Landing. And not all the court needed to even remain there; plenty of Crownlands lords and ladies and their retinue were only around to be seen and partake of Red Keep entertainments and hospitality and not for the purposes of work. They could disperse back to their holdings, to reduce costs. And if they did not understand the limits of the island's purse, he was sure that Selyse would find some way of gently, firmly, showing them all out of the harbor. Either that or Stannis would just... grind his teeth at them, ruin their fun, and they'd be fleeing for their collective health.

Other governmental functions such as the Small Claims Court would continue on within King's Landing, held in temporary offices, set up in various buildings that were confiscated Targaryen loyalist properties, now claimed by the Crown or rented from families such as the Florents, at reasonable rates.

Just about the only person not evacuating the Red Keep was Maester Pycelle; his only duty during this time would be to attend to the Ravenry and it was expected that a multitude of birds would be flying back and forth from Dragonstone, to maintain continuity of governance.

It was all planned out very well by the Florents and Jon Arryn, even down to the schedule of boarding the ships to Dragonstone.

Just about the only intractable obstacle was Cersei, and everybody expected that.

“You know she’s going to complain about the island's sulfur fumes,” Stannis mentioned.

“We’re all going to complain about the island’s stink,” Robert chuckled. “Can’t be helped. Any good hunting on Dragonstone?”

“There are mountain goats enough for the wild dragons to feed on, once upon a time,” Stannis shrugged. “Perhaps you should take up fishing as well.”

Robert’s nose wrinkled at the thought of having to sit in one place, waiting for fish to bite. Fishing was never half as exciting as a hunt.

“Are you very sure Dragonstone will do?” Stannis asked slowly, in the tone that the both of them had learned was his effort at trying to not start a fight. “Targaryen pit?”

“... It’s just a castle. And I heard tell that you let Selyse take charge of renovations and clean out.”

“I did.”

“So. Your wife has taste. And the money to indulge it. I think I shall remember it as more your holding than anything else; she’s changed the place. I should like to visit it on that merit, not just because it’s a place where I’m to continue doing work and duties.”

“Selyse has made many changes. She is not afraid to offer hospitality to a King.”

“Or a Queen, even one as Cersei,” Robert chuckled. “Well. It will be only for a few moons, as the excavators are experienced from cleaning out the Dragonpit and the remaining Alchemists don’t want to be shortened by a head. And remember, we’re not trapped on an island with her, she’s trapped on an island with us! Hah!”

In the past years, Stannis and Selyse made visits to Dragonstone two weeks duration out of every moon, to check in on Erren’s experiments and to maintain a connection to the Dragonstone Islanders. When Stannis must address petitions from the banner Houses sworn to Dragonstone, it was usually done at King’s Landing; it was much easier to resolve by offloading onto the Small Claims Court if possible. Selyse, Delena, and Erren had years enough to make changes to Dragonstone. Between the influx of cash that marrying Selyse entailed and her and Erren’s efforts to increase income from Dragonstone holdings proper by giving the small folk different sorts of work, the castle was transformed.

Dragonstone was the first to get glass from the factories in the Vale; Erren oversaw the installation of proper windows by glaziers throughout the entire castle, sealed with caulking. For the first time, the interior of the castle was more dry than damp. Carefully sited skylights or clerestory windows were cut through stone, relieving as much gloominess as possible. Selyse introduced gleam and glitter by having most of the existing tables and tops of cabinets topped by glass, by replacing or replating all old candlesticks, candelabras, torchiers, and

chandeliers with brass, which caught and reflected the candlelight. As many rooms as possible (especially the state rooms) had new stamped tin ceilings with angled panels and patterns to further catch and reflect candlelight, an idea never seen before.

The innumerable dragon statues and bas reliefs that covered the stone walls were softened by artisans who were charged with adding stylized brass or tin foliage and flowers from all over the Seven Kingdoms, interspersed with the sly faces of foxes or does with fawns peeking out at unexpected intervals from the plants. Since most of the columns of the castle were decorated with coiled dragons already, it suited Selyse to commission stags as the new decorative motif; torchieres were rearing stags holding a torch between their forelimbs, with the prongs of their antlers supporting candlesticks along with new candelabras that were brass stag heads, their antlers again supporting candles. It was here that the Lannisport craftsmen tendency the gild the shit out of objects was allowed free rein in Selyse's quest to add more shine, as each sitting room, reading room, gathering room, and guest chambers all had their own Lannister clock, topped with either a fox or a staghead. So many, in fact, that they took on a new castle staff member dedicated to winding the clocks every day.

Oversized painting copies of a portrait tapestry of Lord Ormund Baratheon and Princess Rhaelle Targaryen from Storm's End were prominently displayed in the Great Hall's largest state dining chamber, the larger gathering chambers, the old throne room, and ballroom. Stannis and Selyse posed for oil portraits, painted very capably by Delena, which were displayed in the library and less formal gathering rooms. Within the ballroom, Erren's successful efforts at mirror-making was showcased; one wall was paneled with mirrors, framed by brass in sharp Art Deco-esque style, quite in keeping with Dragonstone's powerful and hefty architecture.

For the rest of chambers less formal than the state rooms, Selyse went for what she privately called Bordello Moulin Rouge Chic as a style. Different guest rooms were themed with different colors, emphasizing the advances in dying and patternmaking of Florent cloth holdings. It was entirely possible for any visiting House to be hosted in a chamber featuring one of their House colors. Shiny Errenized cotton brocades and dyed fringe trims formed curtains, upholstery, and bed covers. Clean white cotton sheets and lace-edged pillow covers invited visitors to bed. Each bed had nightstands with scented candles within tin canisters. Potpourris made from gathering and drying pine needles and rose petals of Aegon's garden were stuffed into sachets or even small pillows. Thick woolen Stormlands carpets covered the floors for warmth underfoot. Landscape paintings were hung over the hearths. The dressing rooms all had a mirror at a table, with an additional decorative box filled with good paper and a simple black fountain pen.

Instead of old fashioned hard wooden chairs, proper leather wingback chairs and Chesterfields or upholstered chaise lounges were available using a Florent brocade depicting black stags leaping and galloping across cheerful yellow backgrounds. In the sitting rooms and public reading rooms, she added tête-à-tête chairs to amuse and entice. There were felt-topped gaming tables for cards and other table games with lighter cane-back upholstered fauteuil chairs with gracefully curved legs. There were little brass wheeled tea carts and inlaid wood cocktail cabinets. There were stacks of books with lighter, more amusing subjects in ready reach on side tables.

Behind the scenes, Selyse ordered that the servants' halls be expanded in width where possible for ease of the servants going about their duties, that dumbwaiters be installed, that wheeled carts be used for the ease of servants delivering meals and sundries and cleaning staff delivering clean laundry. The kitchen made use of methane gas grills in addition to the usual ovens and Selyse's modern ideas on the efficiency and storage of kitchenware and foodstock were implemented. Pantries, stockrooms, the stillroom, and wine cellar were inventoried and reorganized, with all records updated.

The rooms were resort style before there was such a thing as a resort. It was stately, yet inviting. The wet gloom of old Dragonstone transformed into something darkly seductive, with leather, brocade, fringe, and mirrors. The visiting court exclaimed at the effect, overwhelmed by the mood created and edited by Selyse. Even Stannis had not been fully aware of all the cumulative changes instituted by Selyse. Renly pulled on his sleeve and asked if he could make Storm's End look like this when he was of age.

Stannis looked around, noting the changes to their private chambers while they rested before preparing for the feast to welcome the royal court to Dragonstone. He leaned back, testing the chaise lounge, while watching Selyse as she bathed.

"Everything is much more comfortable," he finally said.

Selyse slowed her customarily rapid scrubbing with her washcloth and looked over her shoulder at him, smiling.

"I am glad you approve."

"I suppose everything is also, in some fashion, for sale?"

"Oh yes," Selyse said. "I can see the envy in everybody's eyes. King's Landing woodworking guilds have already been warned to prepare for an influx of new customers and I've had Erren and Delena draw up furniture construction plans and instructions to pass on to them. And Davos is very good at carving; he's made miniature models of the new chairs and things to go with the drawings."

Stannis nodded. He could understand that; new markets for all the Florent fabrics for upholstering, expansion of their assembly line techniques in the woodworking guilds would greatly improve both quality and quantity of stock, lowering prices for good furniture pieces and increasing trade availability into the houses of merchants and other wealthier commoners, increased trade for either wool or cotton for stuffing, increasing the need for what Selyse called tree farms; countryside smallfolk planting out and tending to carefully chosen stocks of oak, maple, walnuts, ash and other trees, increasing the demand and trade in lumber, new jobs all around, and all meaning higher sales taxes collected, to be put to good use for all the improvements to King's Landing and further on in the Seven Kingdoms.

The Florents' tinkering resulted in the idea that just about anything could be powered by treadmill or pedaling. For the Dragonstone kitchens, Erren put together a pedal-powered blender that rendered ingredients down to pleasing smoothness for soups. Good, thick soup was filling for the castle's staff and if one can trust Selyse's ideas of what she called nutrition, the mix of ingredients rendered in a soup was better for a body than mere wheat or barley

flour baked into bread. Another blender was made that accommodated the quick rendering of meat for making sausages or dumplings. Stannis could well see the use of such labor and time saving devices for the making of masses of food, suitable for the canteens of both marines or the Gold Cloaks. Selyse saw the potential in the manufacturing and selling of such devices for the canteens that served shipyards, factories, public schools, or even the charitable kitchens run by septs and motherhouses.

In the case of the visiting court, Selyse and Erren also used the same idea to design a pedal-powered whisking mixer that whipped egg whites and cream, cake batter and egg yolk, allowing Dragonstone's kitchens to turn out desserts sure to impress with their lightness and flavors. If Robert should be very impressed by it, the royal kitchens would get these blenders and mixers along with recipes and from then on, nobles would be clamoring for their own, to copy the cuisine enjoyed by the royal court. Selyse said that given the establishment of the Seven Kingdoms Patent Office, Dragonstone would be exclusive manufacturers of said blenders for twenty years directly, with Erren and Selyse co-owning the patents for that duration.

Selyse was, in Stannis' opinion, overly excited about yet another layer of governmental bureaucracy. Granted, so far the only patents were for House Florent. He was told that Tyrion was being encouraged to file for a patent for his clock design and for the Flushing Jake, to set precedent and give the gloss of prestige to the new Patent Office. Selyse had explained that as quietly as the Florents operated, the Lannisters under Tywin's leadership did the opposite. It would be good to let it be known that only Tyrion Lannister was allowed to go into business building out his clocks and the Jakes. Would be copiers would be afraid of Tywin Lannister's wrath and facing any punishment he might take; he did not love his son, but he did love his House's name and good reputation.

Selyse slid down into the bath water soak, leaning her head against the edge.

"Stannis, take off your clothes and get in here."

He undressed and got in. The tub was large enough for them to be comfortable side by side. He scrubbed soap on before lowering himself to soak. They soaked in comfortable mutual silence.

"All prepared for the feast?" Selyse finally asked. She lifted her foot out of the water and brought it closer, checking to see how pruned she was. She put her foot back under; she would sit for some more.

"Yes," Stannis said. "We'll show off Dragonstone's kitchen skills and that we are finer managers of the island than past Targaryens through the quality of the feast itself."

It was a pity that the glasshouses were so very new; Selyse had surprised him by showing him a collection of lemon and orange tree saplings, bought at great cost all the way from Dorne, sailing to them in carefully tended pots as a gift.

They would simply make do with the cranberry sauce for the roast ducks. Stannis favored sour above all other flavors. Robert could never understand it. Renly was also similarly baffled, but he found Stannis' ability to take bites out of raw onions with nary a flinch the

way others might eat apples something interesting and downright awesome. There was some twisted sort of pride shared quietly between Renly and himself about their willingness to eat just about anything. They weren't finicky or precious like other nobility. They knew what it was to struggle. To starve. So they would occasionally notice each other staring too contemplatively at pigeons or gulls in King's Landing. And never saying a word about it.

As this was a feast that he was nominally holding, Stannis would have to be prepared for gladhanding. Robert's presence would always be helpful for drawing away the more tedious or obnoxious of nobility, but he must display unflinching ability and impress those directly sworn to him. At the least, House Velaryon and House Celtigar should be carefully cultivated and any grievances against House Targaryen acknowledged and leveraged. Stannis slowly exhaled before standing to climb out of the tub.

Selyse followed after and Stannis had a moment's thought that what would be really useful for settling the mounting annoyance and distaste for the upcoming festivities would be an orgasm. On the other hand, the new bed looked far too welcoming and he would never be late to his own appointments if he could help it.

"Feeling down?" Selyse rubbed his shoulder.

"Yes."

Selyse kissed his cheek.

"We may rest later. But tonight. We perform."

Stannis nodded.

It was a ridiculous balancing act; they must appear rich, and yet not outshine Robert or Cersei. For this, he had a new set of court clothes. The golden thread that formed the embroidery was even more dense than before and heavy. Armor was one thing. This? Absolute waste. Granted, Robert would be wearing his cloth of gold cloak, which was even more unwieldy, in addition to his crown. So Stannis had relative freedom. Selyse echoed him with black and gold velvets, a column of slinky fabric draped languidly over her hips, and glittering at her shoulders were beaten gold sequin swirls forming abstracted antler rack patterns, dusted with topaz and citrine beading, splashing across her back and down her long sleeves to her elbows. Her neckline plunged low at the front, daringly so. The paleness of her skin there was set off by the fabulous long five-strand pearl necklace she was wearing for tonight, all Dragonstone pearls from the pearl farms Erren and the other Florents helped establish.

She looked at herself in the mirror. She rolled her shoulders, throwing them back and lifting her chin, becoming authoritative and serene, plastering on her placid Court Face. She turned her head and the gold embellished topaz studded hair pins from her wedding glinted in her hair.

"Into the fray, Stanny Blue Eyes."

"Yes."

They checked in on Armand. He was happily installed in the nursery and secure with his toys.

She tucked her hand at his elbow and they headed out to the feasting hall.

They ate well on garlic bread, Florent onion soup, baked oysters, lobster tails, chicken braised in wine, breaded white fish filets pan fried in butter, endive salad, lamb with mint sauce, roast duck with cranberry sauce, hard and soft cheeses sliced thin and spread on crackers, brisket with molasses baked beans, and finished with egg custard pies topped with ostentatiously tall meringue caps.

Stannis managed as he had learned over time at King's Landing; his handshakes were firm yet not bonecrushing, he nodded in greeting (He did not smile. That was utterly beyond him in the moment among near strangers and strangers) and made sure to say everybody's name in acknowledgement. He stated with some genuine feeling that he hoped the trip over was fine, that nobody suffered too much from seasickness, and that their rooms within Dragonstone were to their taste and comfortable. He accepted compliments about the feast and Dragonstone itself. For this, he proudly repeated that it was Selyse's doing. It was simple, always, to give credit to her.

Selyse did her magic. She somehow, despite laughingly jesting in private about how tedious some people she encountered were, managed to easily be welcoming, smiling occasionally but not too widely, perpetually pleased to meet and greet and give compliments to all and sundry.

"Lord Celtigar," her tone was ever inviting. "How well you look this evening! What a fine way to wear your hat!"

She then reached out and patted his forearm, saying that he looked very elegant in High Valyrian.

"Did I get that right?" Selyse tilted her head with inquiry. "I trust that you would correct me, if I made any mistakes at all?"

Aged Lord Ardrian Celtigar brightened from her asking for his advice and good opinion. His riches were the labors of his ancestors and any prestige was outdone by the rival Velaryons. To say nothing of looks; House Celtigar boasted the purple eyes and silver hair of Valyria well enough, but they were not bred so fine in the bone nor fair in the face. It was entirely possible for Valyrian people to be plain and unfortunately, House Celtigar exemplified this. To be noticed by the wife of his overlord was quite the compliment!

"Your accent is charming!" he replied also in High Valyrian. "You do your studies great credit."

He would stay longer, to make much of Lady Selyse's fluency, but oh, Lord Velaryon had overhead and now, as ever, he was being pushed aside by the more handsome, more charming man who was all too eager to speak in their shared language together. He made his parting bows and went back to his seat.

He only sat down for a little while, before a servant appeared, holding a note. He opened and read it. It was in Lady Selyse's hand, begging for forgiveness for her impertinence, but she noticed that he had a cough and was hoping that he was not too put out by her offering him some cough lozenges. The servant held out a dish of lozenges and Lord Ardrian took one. He put it in his mouth, prepared for bitter herbals, but it was alright. Anise, sage, thyme, peppermint, and horehound in a dried molasses mixture which worked to immediate soothing effect.

"My thanks," Lord Ardrian said. "I'll have the whole dish in my chambers."

The servant nodded and left and Lord Ardrian was more pleased than he had expected. How gracious a lady, to care for guests so well, what hospitality!

Everybody rested after the feast, digesting. They had two days to do so before attending a ball, the first ball on Dragonstone since last Targaryen possession. When the servants threw open the double doors into the ballroom and everyone saw the wall of mirrors, they gasped. Glances were made at the famously austere Stannis for his reaction to the undoubtedly costly extravagance of his wife.

Selyse grinned at him and he raised her hand to his lips to kiss once. Simply that, nothing else.

Astounding.

The Mirrored Ballroom, as Dragonstone's ballroom was already being called, put to shade the ambitions of all sorts of aspiring mistresses and their grasping fathers. What did she have to do, to get something like that!? The whole of Dragonstone was to be her jewel, the courtiers whispered, her own pleasure palace. Some like Prince Oberyn remembered how Dragonstone was under the Targaryens and to see it transformed so; wondrous. Costly. Such a woman, who could extract prodigious sums from a man as Stannis Baratheon must be more beguiling than the best trained courtesans out of Lys.

It was all a bunch of ridiculous tosh, Lysa knew.

Lysa knew very well that copper and tin were pulled up in the tons from Royce mines for the brass and tin jarring of the Royal Fleet and Iron Islands Trading Company and all the fabrics within the castle must be Florent factory-made and paid at cost. It was not costly, so much as time consuming to have all these goods made. But they did have years to do so, after all. It was not Lord Stannis alone paying for Dragonstone's changes, but Selyse's own money and her family money and family sources in addition. She knew that wonders came out of the Foxhole and here, in Dragonstone. She didn't quite understand what was so wonderful about the new Seven Kingdoms Patent Office when Selyse told her of it, only that it made Selyse and other individual Florents rich off of their ideas. The idea of that was entirely new and strange and she certainly could not have come up with it on her own. Jon wasn't quite sure himself of what it meant or the importance. Not even King Robert. Yet Selyse was convinced that letting the acolytes, maesters, and other learned men of Old Town know of such a thing, let alone the more creative amongst the crafting guilds would cause more innovation and business to grow and increase within Westeros.

With all these courtiers here at Dragonstone, Erren was forced to leave his labs; he had to assist Selyse and Stannis in playing host and to keep operational security by barring the way into the most secret of areas; an entire wing of the older, more fortress like of Dragonstone converted into workshops and labs. Lysa knew of them. But she certainly did not know where or what went on inside them. She didn't even know the entrance proper to the lab section of Dragonstone. She would not be surprised if an entirely new false wall was built for the purpose of hiding it and that you could only enter if you knew which fox statue to stand in front of and-, she didn't know, you pressed a paw or nose to open a secret entrance. She did not care to know more; it was enough that House Arryn was benefitting with glass factories, porcelain factories, and surely, mirror factories after all these lords and ladies got a good look at the Mirrored Ballroom. Already, she could predict all the new, comfortable, frankly sexy upholstered furniture would be all the rage and the Florents would reap more profits from the furniture making guilds purchasing fabrics for upholstering.

The business of governing would continue, no doubt, but with Dragonstone so transformed, it was a time for some well-earned leisure, she thought. Jon looked quite refreshed already, with the last of the wildfire caches finally being cleared and his worries reduced. She was ready for the ball wearing an Arryn heirloom piece; a silver necklace with sapphires as large as quail eggs. Her draped column gown of shimmering Errenized cotton was also blue, with silver embroidered falcon shapes at the collar border of her bodice. At her wrists were silver cuffs, engraved with leaping trout on waves.

Queen Cersei shone golden in the candlelight of the Mirrored Ballroom. A ruby and gold tiara fronted her traditional heavy crescent rolled and braided Westerlands coiffure and a matching heavy gold necklace of rubies framed by diamonds glittered at her neck. Her gown was made out of the new lion brocade that was so popular with the Lannisters these past days. Her skirt was narrower as a concession to the popularity of the style set by Selyse and herself, but flared out wider at the knees with heavy flouncing and her sleeves remained flowing and dagged. She was pleased with herself, pleased by the splendor of her raiment, pleased by looking at herself in the mirrors.

The Mirrored Ballroom was spectacular in candlelight. It seemed as if they were dancing on forever, the mirrors creating an enchanted magical tableau. The punch bowls remained topped off, the idea of having supper during the middle of the ball instead of eating beforehand so that the dancers would not feel too heavy was quite clever, and having many card tables and chairs at the perimeter for the comfort and entertainment of those who wished to sit out was considerate. As usual, Jon danced with her for the first half prior to supper and then sat out to rest for the second half, watching her fondly as she danced with others. She hoped that Jon would live long enough for little Roland and Elyse to have fond memories of their father; he was such a kindly husband. So important to the Realm; why Lord Stannis said all the time that he couldn't do half of what he accomplished with the Royal Fleet if it weren't for her husband supporting him!

She danced with Lord Renly and King Robert and any number of Florents and Valemens. Selyse had warned her that as it was inevitable that she become a widow that she must be careful about being seen to favor one man or another before her husband passed. She may do what she wished afterwards; Selyse called it being a merry widow, but until then, she must not risk Roland's position. She was Lady of the Vale. She went to play rounds of Mere,

claiming victories, and went to sit with Lady Samantha Florent to exchange observations on the ball. Lady Samantha was never so obvious as to be seen taking notes in public for Page Six. Lysa thought she would simply have to write up on the Mirrored Ballroom. Yes, and the newest style of... furnishings for the stately, gracious home. Smallfolk, no matter how wealthy, didn't have keeps, after all. She'll have to ask around as to the opinions of others on what they thought of their guest rooms afterwards. Quotations gave columns authenticity.

And as the finale to the ball, Erren Florent announced the newest in entertainments, a spectacular, never before seen treat for all and sundry, an amusement to write home about! They went outside to Erren's showman patter and directed to look up into the night sky, over the harbor.

The crowd settled and then Erren blew a horn.

All was quiet, then what Lysa could only describe as a streak of fire, whistled shrilly in the night air as it rose up as fast as an arrow, high, high, high and then exploded into a- a flower of yellow flame in the sky. The crowd gasped. It was not the wild sick green of Wildfire. The crack and boom were not as terrifying as real thunder, but the flashes of light, it was similar to lightning! They watched, entranced, a little frightened, while King Robert clapped and cheered and hooted from each explosion in the sky.

"Extraordinary!" Jon leaned in to her. "What can they be? They don't look like wildfire at all!"

"Erren Florent would know!" Lysa replied. "Goodness, that one was big!"

They glanced at Erren, who was also looking up at the sky. A boom and his face was illuminated. He had an eerie, mad look of joy on his face.

"Hmm," Jon said.

"What is it?"

"... I expect that these are not mere entertainments."

They watched as another series of explosions set off.

"... Weapons?" Lysa ventured after a few moments. "They are fire flying in the air."

"Just so," Jon nodded.

"They shan't sell to just anybody," Lysa said faithfully. "They'd know the risks."

Jon hummed again. They watched all the way to the end of the show.

It really was some thing to write home about!

Dragonstone: Vacationing

The following days were relaxed with easy amusements. Lysa went with groups of ladies who found reason to rise early in the morn and peer out of certain windows, giggling at their own daring, to watch the Marines' daily training jog on the beach in their short sleeved shirts and training short trousers, some bare chested. She would then have Roland and Elyse sent in from their nursery, and go to sit with Selyse, who now liked to write while Armand and his nurse were in the room with her. While Roland and Elyse were carefully rolled onto their tummies for Tummy Time, Armand would play by himself, still too young to take notice of the two new babies in the room. Lysa hoped they would grow to be best of friends. And perhaps more? She was sure that Stannis and Selyse would not take issue to the idea of a betrothal between Armand and Elyse, but Lysa was learning that they would much prefer later arrangements, as was done for the main line Florent cousins and Selyse herself. Persons should grow and have known characters before being made to do their duty to their Houses by taking on the responsibility of marriage.

She supposed it made much sense; Catelyn was completely insufferable at twelve, going on and on about her great match with Brandon Stark. What little girl child of twelve knew what marriage truly was? And truly, why should she be so eager to let her daughter go? There was no telling if they should be blessed with another sibling and if they were the only two Arryns of their generation, how more precious they were! Roland's match would necessarily be of great consideration. But Elyse, Lysa thought to herself, running her fingers through her little girl's strawberry blonde hair, she could wait. She ought to be courted by suitors and have her heart's desire. A time of peace and no risk of being tied to a husband many years older than her. This was Lysa's burden and she would not have such a thing happen to her own daughter.

Selyse would practice her instruments and sing, or both of them would read and write with Lady Samantha. Delena would join them or not; she would often be found sketching various scenes of Dragonstone and painting. Various ladies would drop by for tea and table games or sewing. The comfort and ease of Dragonstone was such that even the necessary duty of paying visits to Queen Cersei was not such an ordeal that it usually was. It did help that she was much occupied with Prince Eddard.

Prince Joffrey was not used to his mother attending to anybody else. He was seasick the whole trip over, frightened by the uncontrolled rocking of the ship, and the unfamiliar surroundings. He tried clinging to Cersei, only she was not any better when it came to seasickness and they drove each other apart with the smells. He miserably wanted Robert, except Robert was on an entirely other ship. Selyse had delicately advised Robert on the sense of separating the Royal Family for a ship journey. He saw the sense of it; the deaths of his parents was a sensitive subject, but he was going to learn better from it.

He was fussy and unhappy with all the changes and an unfamiliar nursery and bed. Stannis took the time to tell him some Florent childrens' stories, attempting to distract him. One quickly became his favorite, one that Stannis was ordered to tell again and again.

“-The Gingerbread Man ran and ran deeper into the woods until he saw a hunting hound. And the Gingerbread Man said, Run, run as fast as you can-”

“I’m the Gingerbread Man and YOU CAN’T CATCH ME!” Joffrey shrieked gleefully.

“-The hound barked: We shall see! And the hound ran and ran after him, but the witch's magic was still true and the hound was left behind. Next he came upon a huge wolf-”

“I’m the Gingerbread Man and YOU CAN’T CATCH ME!”

“And the wolf howled: We shall see! And again, they ran and ran and Gingerbread Man escaped. He ran on and on, until he came upon a fox-”

“I’m the Gingerbread Man and YOU CAN’T CATCH ME!”

“But the fox didn’t move at all. He stayed sitting. The Gingerbread Man didn’t understand. So he said once again-”

“I’m the Gingerbread Man and YOU CAN’T CATCH ME!”

“The fox only shook his head. ‘Why, what is it that you said? I’m hard of hearing, I do apologize for my rudeness, but I must ask that you come closer.’”

Joffrey ceremoniously took a big step closer to Stannis.

“I’m the Gingerbread Man and YOU CAN’T CATCH ME!”

Stannis tilted his head and put his hand behind his ear.

“Oh, dear, said the fox. I really did not hear a word you said. Can’t you please come closer and repeat yourself?”

Joffrey took another big step closer and this was Joffrey’s favorite part (and the part Cersei hated the most): and yelled at the top of his lungs.

“I’M THE GINGERBREAD MAN AND YOU CAN’T CATCH ME!”

Joffrey laughed as Stannis dramatically rocked backward from the force of his shout. He stood, wriggling in place, looking up at Stannis as he slowly put his hand down, his expression solemn as ever.

“Oh, the fox said,” Stannis quirked his brow. “REALLY?”

Stannis bared his teeth and Joffrey shrieked again as he tried to turn and run but got snatched up by the armpits by Stannis and lifted off the floor.

“And the fox went SNIP-SNAP-” Stannis pinched Joffrey’s cheeks.

“AAARGH I AM SLAIN AND EATEN!”

“AND ATE THE GINGERBREAD MAN RIGHT UP!”

Stannis turned him upside down in the air. Joffrey laughed and laughed. Stannis turned in a circle, swinging Joffrey by holding his ankles, causing him to shriek some more, before putting him back down on the floor. Joffrey sat up and in excess of spirits, proceeded to run in circles, shouting that he was the Gingerbread Man.

The first time the story was told and he began declaring himself the Gingerbread Man, Cersei had scolded Joffrey; he was a Prince!

“I know that, Mother! Don’t be silly, I know I’m not really a cookie! Don’t you know anything?”

“It is not becoming of you to run around so!”

Joffrey pouted and shouted back.

“Father runs around all the time! And the Royal Marines, the ones who killed all the Ironmen pirates! Running keeps you strong! I’m strong!” and he proceeded to run in circles once again. He climbed and jumped off of the chairs in the nursery or put on sudden bursts of speed that had him colliding with the walls and bouncing off.

One day, Joffrey was so sick of Mother and the stupid baby, who wasn’t interesting at all! Uncle Stannis had to leave and do important Grownup Things in his solar and Father was in the Throne Room doing King’s Work and Joffrey was to Be Good and Not Trouble His Nurse but he was so bored now that he was a much bigger boy-! When Mother looked down at the baby crying again and began rocking Eddard in her arms, he charged and jumped up and hung with all his weight on the door latch, pushed off with his feet against the floor, and he was free! He darted forward as quickly as possible- Run, run, as fast as you can-

“JOFFREY!” Mother screeched. Again.

Joffrey almost made it down the hall that turned towards where outside must be, when he was caught by Sandor Clegane.

“Prince Joffrey, you can’t go-”

“I HATE THE NURSERY! Why can’t I play with the other boys!?”

Stupid Sandor only shrugged. He never understood; he only stood around watching people. Joffrey wasn’t stupid; he saw the other boys got to train in the yard, Uncle Renly with his tourney sword and mace and hammer, just like Father-! Even chubby Samwell Tarly ran and jumped and climbed and punched sandbags and hit things just like the Marines and Father and Uncle Stannis and Uncle Renly and Great Uncle Gerion, then they could go and play, kicking and chasing a red and green ball that Joffrey WANTED but stupid Mother wouldn’t let him get one of his Very Own because he’d hurt himself if he fell- how STUPID-! Father and the Uncles punched each other in the faces ALL THE TIME! Uncle Jaime hit and got hit back at the Red Keep! He was almost as good as Father was at hitting! Joffrey wasn’t a baby who was going to cry just because he fell! Stupid Mother, it must be because she was a GIRL! Aaargh, this was the worst! She thought he was still a baby! But he wasn’t, because Baby Eddard was the new baby! The NEW baby! Unfair! Unfair-unfair-unfair!

Joffrey kicked at Sandor, though he wouldn't feel it because of his armor, and then went limp, shouting No-no-no-no-no-! all the way as Sandor carried him under one arm like a sack of wheat. When Sandor almost got back to the hated nursery, Joffrey gave a mighty thrash, kicking off from the door. Sandor dropped him; Joffrey managed to wriggle free like an eel. Joffrey was stunned for a few seconds by his fall to the floor, his knees stinging, but he wasn't going to give up! He wasn't a stupid cookie! Hah! RUN, RUN, AS FAST AS YOU CAN!

Sandor suppressed a curse. The little brat-!

Joffrey disappeared around a corner.

Sandor thought on the pleasure he might feel, skewering Stannis Baratheon with his sword for even telling the obnoxious tale to Joffrey and inspiring him in the first place.

"Clegane?!" Cersei's voice sounded from behind the door.

"He's run off again," Sandor called back.

"Get him back, then!"

Sandor scowled. Ser Boros had the audacity to smirk at him. He stomped off. At least the little brat wasn't Florent-raised. He was such a shouter and so impatient that he couldn't have begun learning about actually keeping quiet and hiding. Not even the oldest trick; ducking behind a good tapestry. He snorted to himself; the Queen really was coddling the boy awfully. Sandor could even understand the envy Joffrey was feeling as he peered out windows, pouting, watching the other young lordlings here on Dragonstone who were able to play together, getting up to mischief that young boys got into. Certainly, none of these young lordlings were rotting cunts like his dead brother. The stocky one, the Tarly heir, had a softness to his manner that annoyed Sandor and he could see him quickly being tormented by the likes of his own cunt brother, yet the Florent boys were protective of him. And he wasn't bad, actually; the boy was shaping up to be a proper archer and though he was found tearing up and sniffing from time to time, he would train and keep up with the others no matter what in their games. Sandor could respect that in a young boy.

Sandor slowed to a walk. Eh, might as well let the boy run until he was tired, he thought. And the longer the search, the longer he spent not in the boy's company. That's the trick.

"Ready or not, here I come!" Sandor called out.

"Noooo!" the boy's shriek echoed back.

Hah. Fool boy didn't even know about proper Hide and Seek.

Sandor made sure to stomp loudly so that his armor clanked just that much more to draw out the search. Hopefully the boy would be smart enough to take heed of the noise and run some more.

Selyse of course wanted to go on walks while on Dragonstone and Lysa was convinced into descending down into Dragonstone's fishing town. Lysa never had much to do with smallfolk before. Certainly, she was taught a condescending graciousness in manner when it came to addressing smallfolk who entered Riverrun during petitions to Lord Hoster. It was barely acceptable in terms of her natural shyness. It was only after getting to know the Florent ladies and learning to hold gatherings and dinners with Kings Landing's merchants and guildmasters that she eased into understanding the need to converse with sincerity with commoners. Riverrun certainly could not have prepared her for it; other lords had towns and more experience speaking to the more educated and canny commoners. The business of ruling a city caused one to have more than lords and ladies, knights, and men-at-arms that needed consideration. Lysa was not taught to respect the qualities of merchants and the professional smallfolk of trades.

Selyse demonstrated simple respect. She did not save her courtesies for the nobility. Very occasionally, she would go out with escort into the markets, taking surveys of the spread of Florent fabrics and other interests. She could while away time collecting gossip from merchants and their wives, inquiring about any news from afar, taking note on the general opinion of the Baratheon regime within King's Landing.

Selyse was gregarious as she always was, being a gracious Lady of Dragonstone, holding informal conversations instead of petitions with the people. One method of avoiding the necessity of attending to Queen Cersei was to have these conversations as afternoon teas, outside of the castle itself. One of the nicer inns would set aside a table for her and her guests. Selyse found that Erren was well-liked and that the castellan of Dragonstone was also seen as fair and worthy. The biogas digesters were maintained in good order and the stationed Royal Marines caused no undue troubles. The armory had a healthy stock of dragonglass arrowheads and crossbow bolts, along with knives. The dragonglass knappers continued to labor on and were paid well for their work.

Lysa supposed it was a form of economy; the imported steel that might have been turned into arrowheads or bolts would be saved for other weapons and armor. With Dragonstone's unique stores of this natural resource, it made sense. Lysa was unaware of the finished arrowheads, bolts, and daggers being sent onward in bulk to Eastwatch.

There were more secluded beach coves where the ladies could lift their skirts and shed their stockings to wade into the waters. It was cold! Colder than Riverrun's friendlier waters and Selyse said the same; Brightwater's waters were warmer than the sea. They discovered that they both learned how to swim as children and it was quickly decided that they should both like to go swimming. Selyse and Lysa designed with Delena some swimming clothes to sew up. Lysa would die of embarrassment should any man witness what they came up with, but acknowledged that skirts were dangerous for swimming and would cling when damp anyway. They came up with black short-sleeved one-piece singlets that ended just below the knee that buttoned on the front. To this they added quickly drying cotton slip-on shoes with cork soles. They would cover themselves with cloaks and broad hats to walk down to the cove. They swam out and it was bracing to float and drift, laughing as the waves hit them.

Eventually, notwithstanding her embarrassment, it was known that a group of ladies were in the habit of swimming at a certain cove. Lady Samantha and other dowagers slyly let it be

known that Lord Stannis was just about pulling his visibly sparser hair out issuing punishments to offending men who foolhardily got caught climbing the bluffs to spy upon them. Lysa was sure her face was unattractively blotchy from the mortification. Selyse of course did not feel embarrassed one way or another and went to comfort her husband on the matter and to come up with a solution.

Said solution was to have Stannis himself accompany them while swimming. Lysa could just about kill Selyse for this!

Yet it was sound; absolutely nobody wanted to get caught looking upon the Lord of Dragonstone himself in dishabille. And he certainly would not look at the women; he was so proper! They sewed a swimming singlet for him also and the first time he marched, scowling, alongside them to the cove, Lysa had to stifle her nervous giggling. Selyse tried to lighten the mood with some small talk on the way, but Lord Stannis was not having any of it; he was harumphing the whole way down. Selyse shrugged and entered the water after dropping her cloak and towel. Lysa quickly did so as well as the other ladies. Stannis was courteous; he stood with his arms crossed, facing away from them, glaring at the bluffs, as if daring anybody else to look upon them.

They swam, until they were ready to go back ashore.

“Your turn, Stannis,” Selyse called out, wrapping her towel around her shoulders.

“It’s not necessary.”

“Look, I sewed that for you, you’re getting it wet. Please?”

Does he even know how to swim? Lysa thought to herself, consciously avoiding looking at his bare biceps as he scowled at Selyse.

There was a moment of teeth grinding and then Stannis strode into the water, again as if he was marching into battle.

“Hopefully he isn’t going to be stubborn and literally make it wet and come right back,” Selyse muttered to herself.

Lord Stannis was cooperative and he dunked under and kicked, disappearing from view for a moment. Selyse made a fond sigh.

They waited for him, making desultory conversation until Selyse stopped completely, with a bright-eyed smile towards the water. Lysa burst out with an embarrassed giggle. If anybody asked, Lysa would expect Stannis to resemble a murderous wet cat; he was frowning while he swam. Granted, that was simply what he did while concentrating. Yet there he was, rising from the surf like some wild sea spirit, stormy blue eyed, rivulets of water dripping down his arms and chest in a most distressingly distracting manner. Lysa felt terribly uncouth and warm.

“That’s my husband,” Selyse murmured.

“Enough with the eyefucking, Selyse,” Delena drawled. “We’re in public.”

A chorus of giggles came from all the ladies, which only made Stannis frown harder when he came into earshot. Lysa was going to die!

Selyse pursed his lips playfully at Delena before she ran to him with his and her towels, to help cover and dry him up.

After that, more swimming singlets were made for the men who wished, even the King, so that they could go to a different cove to partake of the sea. Omer and Merrell patiently taught Sam how to swim; Renly knew how already. Sam was frightened at the prospect, considering that his own father thought simply throwing him into a pond would force him into swimming. His friends were much more sensible; he waded out, holding their hands, and they encouraged him to crouch down, at his own pace, to submerge his face in the water while holding his breath. After that they worked on getting him comfortable with floating. Eventually, holding onto a cork life preserver ring, he learned how to kick.

The success of this method meant that Robert worked very hard to convince Queen Cersei to allow them to teach Prince Joffrey. He splashed about wearing a cork float jacket at first for even more additional safety, gradually learning. Otherwise, Joffrey was very happy to be allowed outside, to be in the company of his father and uncles and the boys, and all in all pleased to be away from his boring Mother. He learned how to make sand castles and spent more time than expected patiently shaping walls and towers. He followed after the youngest Florents and Sam as they explored the tide pools, investigating the sealife temporarily trapped within view and reach.

The trip to Dragonstone got even better, by Joffrey’s estimation, from an especial camping trip with his father and uncles and just him only! Well. Sandor Clegane was also on the trip and Ser Barristan and Ser Preston as duty dictated. But he did not care! Cersei tried to dissuade him with tales about how wretchedly uncomfortable camping was and sneering at the idea of sleeping beneath a tent on a bedroll and not on a soft featherbed. Robert wisely told Joffrey that he would have the opportunity to piss on trees in the wilderness and he would not need to take baths the whole time. Joffrey was sold on that! And anyway, he declared, he was an entire five namedays old and plenty strong enough to go wherever his father wanted him to go!

Erren during his mineral prospecting trips crisscrossing the island had refined the maps of Dragonstone, taking into account goat trails and sources of water. He had a suitable campsite set up in anticipation of the King’s visit, one a goodly ten or so miles out into the wilderness, that would serve very well as a base for hunting from. It would be no trouble at all to get to by horseback.

Robert had other ideas. He wanted to take a leisurely survey of the potential hunting opportunities and would not risk a horse going lame on the trails when he was not familiar at all. The island was safe; the dragons were gone and not a bear nor shadowcat lived on the island. The mountain goats were preyed on instead by eagles and treecats. Treecats may prove interesting, elusive quarry; the spotted cats were shy, evening or nighttime hunters

commonly only leaving tracks and feces behind as bare signs of their presence. Imry had not seen a live one yet, just evidence of their kills from scattered mountain goat bones, hooves, and horns. He recorded evidence in the form of teeth marks from gnawing and occasional tracks, which he sketched.

Cersei screeched about the treecats. Robert thought she was overreacting; yes, a treecat was larger than a five nameday old child, but on the other hand, he was going to be there, Sandor was going to be there, and those cats were not aggressive at all, not like shadowcats. You had to corner them in their lairs or chase them up a tree with hounds for the purpose. Treecats were not known at all to attempt eating humans. He'd worry more about wild boar (not that there were any on the island at all) in terms of sheer aggression.

They would hike, with packs upon their backs, Robert decided. They would set up camp at the campsite Imry indicated on a map made for the purpose and spend time doing day hikes, to get to know the lay of the land. Stannis thought it wasn't unreasonable; he could do with more familiarity with his holdings. Renly had never camped in this manner before and was game, though a little concerned about the lack of comforts.

The tents in question would be small, enough to fit a single person lying down and everyone would carry their own waxed canvas tent. They would have hiking sticks, tent pegs, and cordage suitable for pitching their tents. Only Joffrey would be expected to carry only his clothing and a portion of food in his pack. He was entranced by having a pack (just like Father's!) and opportunity to share Robert's tent at night. They were provisioned with filled waterskins, bags of dry beans, whole carrots, garlic, and onions, and oats and dried sausage for cooking, and a mixture of crushed dried meat mashed with tallow, oats, nuts, and dried cranberries that would keep for long distance day hikes, and bags of mixed nuts and dried cranberries for quick bites as they hiked.

Cersei was still nervous, frightened by the idea of Joffrey innocently wandering away from the camp and becoming irretrievably lost in the wilderness. Or perhaps he should fall down a ravine! Erren had a whistle made for Joffrey, so that if he should get lost he would not lose his voice futilely screaming for help. Other whistles were made and they practiced at blowing on them, to make three short tweets, three long, and three short in succession for signaling. He was told very firmly by Robert not to get out of sight on the trail and if he did, to stop moving and wait. He would be taught more woodcraft out in the woods, once the camping began, later. Joffrey could hardly wait.

Stannis had some misgivings about the ability of the pampered boy to keep up. Selyse shrugged at that; they were a group of strong men, after all. If Joffrey did end up exhausted and tantruming on the trail he was still small enough to be carried. Stannis grimaced. He'd rather Selyse herself go on a camping trip; he had no doubt that she would travel at acceptable speed, be clearheaded and cheerful on the march, and otherwise be an ideal travel companion. Selyse kissed him and promised that she was willing herself. Stannis was entirely gratified by her happy attitude about outdoor activities, considering Cersei's loud protestations against and Joffrey's shrieking arguments to let him go.

They set off very early in the morning, with Joffrey stuffed full by Cersei with bacon and eggs and a cup of warm milk.

They went at a slower than usual pace, careful to keep Joffrey in sight. He had bursts of energy and excitement, wanting run run run when the mood took him. He was awed by the sight of a lizard sunning itself on the rocks and picked up pinecones that had fallen on the trail. He whacked at passing shrubbery with his hiking stick. He pointed at passing eagles soaring overhead. He occasionally tripped on the uneven dirt of the trail, sprawling out alarmingly with his whole body, but got up after an initial cry and sniffing, unwilling to seem weak in front of everybody. As he wiped at the sweat growing on his brow, his face became smudged with dirt. He was grinning.

He did tire as the trail began to gain in elevation, but they were in good time. He would be encouraged to have some nuts and berries in order to keep up, to sip at his waterskin, and to check if he felt like needing to potty. The first time, Robert led him off trail to a tree and Joffrey laughed gleefully as he aimed at it, feeling very naughty indeed, just as promised. They had not made it to the campsite by high noon, but they stopped to rest alongside the trail, to eat a lunch of the dried meat-in-tallow chunk. Joffrey wrinkled his nose from the smell of it and made a face at the taste, but chewed and swallowed because Robert took big bites and dared him to. The group each had a single fresh apple for that day for lunch and then no more fresh fruit left on the trip.

Joffrey surprised everyone by applying his stubbornness to the rest of the hike; though refreshed by the lunch and rest, he had much less energy in the afternoon. He trudged along, frowning in a determined manner.

“Do you want to be carried?” Robert asked.

“I can do it!” Joffrey puffed. “I can do it Father!”

But he was done and could go on no more; finally, he was forced to stop and dropped, rolling onto his back, his pack causing him to flop his arms and legs out like a flipped turtle.

“I am dying, Father,” Joffrey finally declared. “I’m dead.”

Renly snorted a laugh. Stannis sighed.

“Well, that’s too bad. Guess Eddard’s the new crown prince, eh?” Robert stopped beside him, snickering.

Joffrey was too tired to say anything else. He made a half-hearted whimper instead and flopped his arms and legs.

“Well, at least we prepared for this,” Robert took off his pack and opened it. “We’ll get to camp anyway and you are not dying.”

Robert took out a cloth sling big enough to hold Joffrey. He put it on, closed up his pack and put that back on, and picked Joffrey up. Joffrey’s limp legs were put through the sling’s openings and Joffrey clung to Robert’s neck, his head drooping onto Robert’s shoulder as they resumed the hike. From that point on, the men moved at proper marching speed.

Selyse had in the past encouraged Erren to consider beauty in addition to the utility in the selection and preparation of a campsite as a base for future hunting trips. She was wise, in that there was a waterfall that emptied into a small fresh pool of clear water close by and the pool fed an everflowing stream down the mountainside. The hiking party would be rewarded by this view before making their way to the campsite upstream from the waterfall.

Once there, they would find that the campsite was prepared with a stone-lined firepit with an iron grill placed nearby, and a pile of kindling. They set their packs down and made ready for their first lunch. Robert took Joffrey out of the sling and set him sitting down upon his pack. Joffrey watched, fascinated, as Robert made the fire with a flint striker and tinder and nursed the flame, puffing away steadily with his breath, kneeling on the ground with his head low. Joffrey had never seen his father in such a seemingly humble position. Yet it was necessary! Robert stayed tending the fire. Stannis and Renly were pacing the clearing, determining where they would like to pitch their tents. Sandor had taken the cooking pot and bucket, to fill with water. Ser Barristan and Ser Prestan were standing guard.

After sitting quietly for some more, Joffrey felt strong enough and went over to Stannis and Renly, who were working together on the first tent. Renly explained to Joffrey that a healthy tree with no dangerous dead branches they could see was especially useful for pitching a tent. One had to avoid the chance of a falling branch. One hiking stick was stuck firmly into the dirt, an adequate distance away from a tree trunk. Renly showed Joffrey the knots used to have the cord tied to the tree trunk already and Renly was holding the hiking stick upright while Stannis secured the cord to the top of the stick. From there, the hiking stick kept the cord taut as they secured the end to the dirt with a tent peg. The rectangular canvas was arranged over the cord, down the middle lengthwise. The free ends of the canvas were folded under and arranged to separate the bedroll from the ground directly. There were loops sewn at regular intervals all around the hem of the canvas and four were chosen to be secured with more tent pegs to tighten the whole canvas into a simple a-line arrangement.

“And that’s all?” Joffrey asked.

“That’s all.”

Joffrey knelt down and crawled into the tent.

“Mother would not like this at all!” he announced gleefully as he crawled out the other side.

He watched as Renly and Stannis set about pitching the rest of the tents. Renly had found a pair of trees that had grown a satisfactory distance from each other and was thus able to stretch the central cord between the two of them, not needing the assistance of any of his hiking sticks. They next set up Robert and Joffrey’s tent. Sandor, Barristan, and Preston’s tents were arranged in a triangular formation around the campsite, serving as perimeter protection.

During that interval, Sandor had returned with water in the pot and bucket. Barristan and Robert (Sandor would not approach the fire), moved the iron grill stand in position over the firepit. The pot of water was set to boil.

Joffrey returned to the fire, curious.

“What are we going to eat?” he asked.

“Stew,” Robert said. “Beans and Roots.”

Joffrey’s nose crinkled.

“That’s all?”

“It’s camping. You’ll notice there’s not a pantry nor kitchen out here,” Robert waved at the surrounding trees. “We eat what we carry and it must last us three days.”

Joffrey looked at his little tin camping bowl, spork, and cup.

“Very well,” Joffrey finally said. “I want to go explore. May I?”

“Don’t run too far. And if Sandor tells you to stop and go to him, you do so immediately, you hear? You must obey his orders for your safety.”

Joffrey nodded impatiently. Robert looked at Sandor, who bowed his head. They walked off together, Sandor dutifully following Joffrey.

Robert got up, satisfied that the fire did not need his full attention. Stannis and Renly approached.

“It’s a good campsite,” Renly said. “Erren chose well.”

“Yes,” Robert agreed. “It’s good to be out in the wilderness, again. On a mountainside.”

“Regretting not bringing a proper hunting party?” Stannis asked.

“A little bit!” Robert grinned. “But I have time enough for that. Now, let’s get all the food together and chopped.”

They had packed a wooden cutting board. Stannis and Renly set to peeling the carrots, garlic cloves, and the single onion for that evening. They still needed to wait on the water to boil before putting in the dried beans. Stannis and Renly were willing to remain by the fire to watch over the progress of the stew. Robert set off, flanked by Barristan and Preston, to see where Joffrey and Sandor were.

Sandor had wisely kept him on the path towards the stream and they found a sandy spot after clambering over water washed stones and cobble and found Joffrey throwing pebbles into the water. Robert joined him, advising him on finding flatter stones and awed Joffrey by making a stone skip five entire times. Joffrey threw more rocks, one time nearly overturning himself into the water trying to copy him. He succeeded in making a rock skip twice and shrieked with excitement.

The sun was beginning to set by the time they made their way back to the campsite; Joffrey was yawning and Robert was carrying him on his back.

Stannis and Renly were staring at the stew, with Stannis stirring it occasionally, lifting up the ladle and the both of them judgmentally examining the thickness of the liquid.

“Any good?” Robert cheerfully called out.

Stannis cautiously tasted the stew.

“The beans are softened,” he replied. “It’s hot.”

Robert huffed to himself; that was not a useful answer in his opinion. But that was just Stannis’ way. They waited for Barristan and Preston to unfasten their shorter white traveling cloaks and to use wooden clothespins to secure them to a line of cord stretched between trees to form a clothesline for the purpose of keeping the cloaks clean before returning to find seats on the ground. Joffrey was amazed by the idea of sitting directly on the ground. The stew was ladled out.

Perhaps it might have been bettered with salt or dried herbs; they had not taken any, this being the first sort of camping they attempted. But it was hot and filling and after a day of hiking, Joffrey had no complaints and hunger made everything delicious. Sandor took the empty pot back to the stream to rinse out and then to fill up again and set it to boil over the fire, to sanitize the water for tomorrow. Afterward, they sat in silence, staring at the dancing fire flames, all the men not moved to say anything. Eventually Joffrey slipped sideways and fell right asleep in the dirt, dead tired. Robert lifted him up and took him to their tent, took off Joffrey’s boots and dirty socks and day clothes, put him into a nightshirt and tucked him into a woolen quilt on top of his bedroll.

Robert quietly returned to the fire.

Talk lazily rose up then. It was decided that for future camping, perhaps they could have Dragonstone carpenters sent up beforehand to build some simple benches and a table; Stannis and Renly had to chop up the vegetables with the cutting board on the ground and Renly was finicky about the vegetables so close to the dirt. Robert said that what would really liven up proceedings would be a cask of ale.

“Then you must carry it up here yourself,” Renly said. “For I shall not hike with a pound more than required!”

Sandor snorted, but said nothing; he and the Kingsguard hiked up wearing plate armor. Admittedly, they were offered the option of lighter leather armor given the safety of Dragonstone, but it was the principle of the thing. They were on duty on this trip.

“We do need a barrel or box, though,” Stannis said. “There is no place to easily secure our remaining food from animal theft.”

They had collected all of the food together into a single sack and then tied it shut and had a rope tied around it. At the other end of the rope they tied a rock and flung the rock and rope over a tree branch (which took some walking around to find one that wasn’t too high) to pull the sack up off the ground above their heads. The rope was then tied around the trunk of the

tree. The sack dangled in midair out of reach from theft by foxes or ground rodents and hopefully not an intriguing target for inquisitive island ravens and crows or squirrels.

“Now that’s a practical idea,” Robert nodded. “Make note of it.”

Stannis had his notebook out already.

Further plans for improvements were made, before they lit their candles within their folding camping lanterns, put out the fire by pouring water from the bucket and stirring the ashes, and made their way to their separate tents.

Joffrey was still sleeping in the morning after sunrise. The cacophony of woodland birds finally woke him and he sat up, a little confused at finding himself inside the tent, before throwing himself upon Robert’s gut. Robert grunted in surprise.

“Eh! Eh?”

“Get up!” Joffrey cried. “What are we going to do today? Huh? Huh, Father? Get up!”

Robert chuckled and they untangled themselves from the blankets and crawled out. Joffrey wiggled his bare toes in the dirt, having suddenly learned not to step too hard on the pineneedle covered ground. Robert stretched and yawned and Joffrey did the same, rubbing his eyes. Joffrey shivered a little in the morning air, thrilled at the strangeness of being outdoors wearing his nightshirt.

“Did you sleep well?” Robert asked.

Joffrey wanted to say no; it was not at all like sleeping on a featherbed. But, he was here with his Father and he had so much fun so-

“Yes!”

“Very well. Breakfast after dressing and brushing your teeth. And then we hike!”

After a breakfast of oatmeal with dried cranberries and slices of dried sausage, they refilled their waterskins with boiled water and portioned out the meat-in-tallow along with trail mix. They set off as a group, following a route recommended by Erren’s map, which Stannis was in charge of. Robert talked freely to Renly and Joffrey, a running, surprisingly educational flow of words about his observations about prevailing wind and how that would affect stalking prey, noting locations of established game trails, noting any creeks and water sources they passed which would attract wildlife, pointing out the subtle changes in vegetation in relation to elevation and wind exposure, and comparing with what they were experiencing to what he remembered from the mountainous terrain of the Vale. At high noon, they would stop and eat lunch and consult the map. Erren’s routes were all loops back to the campsite. It would be decided then whether or not they should press forward as a whole group or whether or not Sandor should double back with Joffrey while everybody else pressed forward to meet at the campsite later.

They were very lucky that they did spot a white mountain goat, a mature billy, walking along a ridgeline one day. Robert pssped, going quickly into a crouch and waved his hand behind him. Everybody followed suit.

“Joffrey! Joffrey, look!” he whispered excitedly. “Look at the size of him!”

“Oh!”

They watched.

“If you had your bow, what would you do?” Joffrey excitedly asked.

“Check the wind,” Robert replied. “Check your shadow. You’d want to be higher than the goat, ideally. So you begin the stalk. Don’t want it seeing you and running off. Go off trail, keep upwind, maybe have to stop and wait if it happens to look towards you. Pretend to be a rock. And if you get close enough, if you have it right, take your shot.”

“Oh,” Joffrey said, wide-eyed.

“If you get a good hit,” Robert continued. “If you get it right in the body, the soft bits, lung, liver, gut, the creature will run off. They all will. So you must keep it in sight. Many hunters lose their quarry in deep brush. It will run for... oh, near fifty yards, perhaps, if it’s a strong one. You must follow and wait. Wait for it to die. Because even plant-eaters will fight to the last.”

The goat passed out of sight and Robert began a crouched, fast stalk along the trail, trying to keep it in sight. The others followed suit.

“If it dies and the body falls, it might slide downhill. It’s steep enough around here for it. And then, the real work begins. The worst thing-”

Robert stopped. Everybody froze. Robert took off from the trail, uphill.

They crested the hill, scrambling, Joffrey hoisted up and clinging to Sandor’s waist, with Robert going flat on the ground, waving his hand behind him, wanting the others to follow suit. They did and carefully peered over the edge of the ridgeline.

The goat luckily did not run off. It was downhill, working its way along boulders and loose rock.

“Like that,” Robert continued. “Shoot now and the animal will end up at the bottom. And the worst thing is a hunter who rushes after the body. Look at the rock. See those piles of rubble from past winter snows, carried down the hill? That’s treacherous footing. Don’t go right after the animal. If it was dead down there, I’d go that way-”

Robert traced the air with his finger, pointing out a twisting, longer, yet safer route down into the valley.

“To get to it. And then imagine. It wouldn’t be any trouble for me to haul one goat up by myself. But anybody else, it’s a two man job.”

“Yes,” Renly breathed with understanding.

Joffrey nodded.

They watched as the goat moved out of sight. Robert blinked, his hunter’s intent passing away. He stood up, holding onto his hat as the wind picked up.

“What a view!” he jubilantly roared and the wind carried his words away. “What a day!”

They all stood up and surveyed the view from the ridgeline; the wind pushing the clouds along the horizon, the distant flat shine of the water of the sea, the line formed where the elevation changed enough that even the hardest of native pine trees ceased to grow and instead low, prickly shrubs clung stubbornly to the cliffs, changing the color from dark green and black-brown into mottled pale greys that contrasted starkly with the sharp, grey-black rocks of Dragonstone Island itself. The wind was brisk, the insects buzzed, a far away bird called out to mark its territory, and it smelled of brush, of sulfur, of distant salt from the sea.

They stood there, taking it in.

Robert reached out and gripped Joffrey’s shoulder.

By the time they returned to the castle, Joffrey had torn holes in both knees of his trousers, his cheeks were smudged anew with dirt, he was reddened with the beginnings of sunburn, he smelled of sweat, pine needles, and firesmoke, he was terribly hungry, and he was grinning and shrieking with excitement. Cersei wrinkled her nose at his stink, as he babbled about seeing a mountain goat.

Afterwards, various lords and knights trailed after King Robert as he hunted mountain goats, once a sevenday, taking trips out that lasted three days at the most. Now familiar with the campsite and trails, they would ride and pack mule up, set up camp, and set out with bows on foot within an hour of sunrise the next day. Robert, liking Renly’s idea of lighter packing and from Stannis, speed of deploying, stressed that this was no leisurely hunt like in the kingswood, with packs of dogs, gamekeepers, horns blowing, personal servants, and palatial tents that required four or six servants to put up, with heavy central support poles. True, the campsite was improved with a rustic table and benches and a food storage box and even newly dug pit latrines, given the sudden influx of persons.

But this sort of camping and hunting was more rough, more primitive. More challenging. And Robert did so like a challenge. He even pondered doing the same in the kingswood once they got back to King’s Landing, stress testing more of the Florent methods and innovations for camping and army equipping. As it was, Erren and assigned servants were fine with inspecting the camping pack and gear of prospective lords and knights and Selyse was quick to recommend what to purchase from Dragonstone itself for their trips out. More than a few lords and knights had to withdraw, feeling it beneath them to endure what hedge knights did on purpose, potential notice of the King or not.

Alekyne and Dacey, as well as Imry and the rest of the Florents arrived a couple weeks later to Dragonstone, for reasons of their own for the delay.

Dacey immediately wanted to explore a new wilderness. And so they all, even Selyse and Lysa with their babies, arranged a Family Trip and went to the campsite as one large group. Well. Everybody, except Cersei.

Not having to hike to the site itself was just the thing and the pack mules were capable of carrying up folding bassinets and a folding highchair and playpen suitable for corralling Armand from wandering too close to the firepit or away. The bassinets and playpen had their own sunshades to prevent sunburn and netting to keep out biting insects. Their soiled cloth diapers were rinsed in a tin tub and air dried on a separate clothesline positioned downwind from the campsite, to be properly washed back at the castle. To prevent the twins from being too cold at night, and taking into account Jon's age, the Arryns stayed in two separate larger, fully enclosed tents with room for folding camp cots and with tent support poles tall enough so that Jon would not need to crawl to enter. Lysa shared her tent with the nursemaids and bassinets for the twins, so that they could immediately get to nighttime feedings. They packed extra candles so that the camp lanterns could safely burn through the nights. Armand was bundled up into a sleeping sack and slept between his parents; he was old enough that he slept through the night.

Everyone had doubts about bringing babies along, but Lysa was able to take an easy hike with Selyse the first day, not being fatigued from the horse ride up and confident that the nursemaids could watch over them at the campsite, and then subsequently was content to remain at the camp, sitting upon a folding camp chair in the shade and reading and writing when she wasn't watching over her twins and playing with Armand and generally relaxing. She found the birdsong and wilderness calming and pretty in the environs of the established campsite. The babies were also surprisingly calm; with Lysa and attentive nursemaids at the ready, every beginning whimper of distress was averted from full on squalling.

With the presence of Armand's nursemaid and many other ladies on the trip, Selyse was able to go off on more challenging hikes with Stannis in the early mornings, wearing trousers tucked into knee-high laced boots and calf-length skirts in the Mormont manner. They pushed to be back after taking lunch out on the trails; Stannis and Renly could be depended upon to be keen to have the pots of water boiling away to make enough stew for the entire party. While Stannis and Renly peeled and chopped and experimented with flavoring the stew with dried herbs, Selyse could play with Armand and relax with Lysa and the other ladies who came along; her mother and Aunt Rosamund, Ser Colin's wife.

Alekyne and Dacey quickly won Robert's favor by having Alekyne's steel wheeled bow available to demonstrate. He was awed by the increased range and power it had. Alekyne had a few prototypes available for Robert and Dacey to test; she found them difficult to draw but Robert's brute strength was up to the challenge. The three ranged out to the more remote heights, eager to test themselves against the inclines and goats. Robert was able to lead them to the places where he'd discovered the goats traveled to and from between sheltered places where they slept and favored foraging grounds, and they would wait and stalk to their satisfaction. The days where they did bring down a goat it was a grand day; fresh meat for the grill on skewers!

Jon Arryn had a fishing pole and net brought up, after Robert described the stream. He followed the stream, until he found a good spot where it widened and the current had slowed to cast out, dancing his fishing fly over the surface of the water. There were trout this far upstream in the mountains and Jon sighed, tension loosening from his shoulders as he contemplated the water. He was able to present Lysa with two acceptably sized trout from his wicker creel and she clapped her hands, appreciating the skill and patience it took to reel them in. The fish were cleaned and placed upon a pan to fry and shared between them as a meal. They were delicious in their plainness, fresh caught from a mountain stream.

Renly led the young Florents and Sam on separate trails from the higher goat hunting sites and they rambled through the woods, chattering to themselves and occasionally attempting to shoot at some passing wildlife, not in any particular need to bring food back. They sketched plants and the landscapes they saw, they searched for footprints and practiced at tracking. Sam was keen to use his bow and by the end of that trip, he managed to bag a grouse! Sometimes Imry or Erren joined them, sometimes not. It could be depended upon for Imry and Erren to disappear off by themselves. Plotting, Renly joked to his friends.

Every night was a minor party around the campfire, with singing, jesting, and games playing. Ser Axell would whittle wood while gruffly having conversation with Ser Davos, who was also working on his own wood carving. (Stannis invited him to invite his family to come as often as he liked. He was granted, along with his family, free use of the campsite.) Ser Colin was snuggled up with his wife Rosamund by the fire, sipping hot mugs of tisane. Lady Samantha sat and listened to her sons as they recounted what they could of their work, missing her very much. Selyse was leaning against Stannis, strumming on her dulcimer. Alekyne and Dacey were similarly snuggled up. Delena was playing with Armand. The younger Florents, Sam, and Renly were loudly harmonizing to Selyse's tune. Lysa was holding Elyse and Jon was holding Roland and they sat together, rocking the babies in their arms.

Robert sat, with Joffrey leaning against him, grinning to himself and clapping along to Renly's singing.

Even Sandor was admittedly pleased by the convivial atmosphere, as he stood in the shadows further away from the fire, leaning against a tree and listening to the singing.

Queen Cersei remained out of sorts and fairly grumpy since Jaime was unable to visit Dragonstone himself the entire time; he was indisputably essential to the wildfire removal operations. She would not be moved from the castle! She tried to content herself with Prince Eddard, who needed her. Ser Gerion shook his head to himself and angled for an invite to the next hunting expedition to the campsite. He was curious and willing to find amusement wherever he could.

She didn't see what the big fuss was about, roughing it in the woods. She much preferred the civilized environs of the castle. She walked the halls, followed by the nursemaid holding Eddard, looking into different rooms. She had demanded from Lady Selyse an explanation about the Mirrored Ballroom. Selyse replied with some nonsense about finding the qualities of reflected light inspiring. Well, the Red Keep could have its own Mirrored Ballroom! Better! Mirrors with frames gilded with Lannister gold, from Casterly Rock! She gnawed on

a thumbnail, a terrible habit, but she was alone, what did it matter!? And, and- polished marble tiled floors, yes, and- Cersei looked up at the stamped tin ceilings and smirked. A mosaic ceiling, Cersei decided, depicting herself and King Robert, as proper, and further images to be decided later, done with tiles of gold, mirrored glass, and colored glass to truly reflect candlelight. Lady Selyse could merely have things brass plated! She could have all the fixtures of the ballroom gilded! Bejeweled! It must outshine Dragonstone's ballroom!

When Robert returned, Cersei demanded to have leave to get the Queen's Ballroom renovated.

"I see. Well, I would be eager to see what Lannister taste does to that old Targaryen Queen's Ballroom."

Cersei smiled, pleased.

"Yet for all that Lannister taste, I do not have the funds of a Lannister. Nobody else does, do they? And there are other more pertinent expenses we must set aside for the Red Keep. Security issues, for example."

"Just take some Treasury funds and do what you wish! You are the king!" Cersei cried out.

Robert reached out and took her hand.

"We must always, always think on the safety of our children, Cersei," Robert insisted. "Why, I've report that there are secret passages leading to the nursery! Doesn't that worry you?"

"No!" Cersei hissed fearfully. "Truly!?"

"Yes. Not servants' corridors. Strange tunnels with peep holes here and there. Why, some assassins might find out about them-"

"Don't say it," Cersei's hand turned into a grasping claw. "Fix it! Fix it right now!"

"The workers have been ordered to do so," Robert nodded. "But that doesn't leave much room in the construction budget for grandeur, you know. The Red Keep is large and Maegor was one of the madder of the Targaryens. It must all be made safe."

Cersei pursed her lips.

"Can you not get a loan from my father? Then it would all be easily afforded!"

"Ah, but to be in debt to your father...?"

"Oh," Cersei frowned for a moment.

Robert stood, silently waiting.

"He'll gift it entirely, if I asked," Cersei sniffed, finally. "He shall! He must! I am the Queen! He'll see reason, I'll not be outshone by, by Lady Selyse! They did not even get rid of all the dragon carvings and statues and gargoyles of this place! I could do up the whole Red Keep

better, I can! Father would see the sense of it, he hated King Aerys, he'll love to help me erase all sign of them, yes-"

Robert chuckled to himself as Cersei rushed off in her distraction, muttering to herself as more ideas blossomed in her mind.

By the end of the wildfire removal, Dragonstone's new relaxing and romantic environs had worked its magic; Selyse was pregnant once again and Dacey was newly pregnant.

King's Landing: Best Laid Schemes

Alekyne and Imry made report to Selyse in the deepest part of Erren's laboratory. It was a long time in coming; they could move only as quickly as the wildfire removals progressed and only recently, with the Red Keep emptied of the nobility. It happened like so; Alekyne would have liked to have Omer and Merrell along with him and Imry for task; they deserved to earn some field experience with low stakes to start, after all. Yet, Selyse did stress that childhoods would end all too soon; why not have them enjoy some harmless fun on Dragonstone with Sam and Renly while they still could? The Red Keep was currently full of workers and guards, with Ser Jaime and Thoros delving underground, following the written testimonies of alchemists. It took some effort, as they were no longer children after all, but Alekyne and Imry slipped past the guards into the Red Keep dressed in nondescript Red Keep servants' livery.

They could safely stay overnights within Stannis' office, where Stannis and Davos stashed water and canned food in preparation for their stay. Thoros promised to thoroughly note and map out lower level passages and tunnels that he had access to with the wildfire removal teams. Alekyne and Imry would work on the upper levels. They bypassed the Ministry of Coins offices; Uncle Axell knew when he was first hired to seek out passages and to secure them as his influence grew greater against outside security threats and incursions. Selyse had investigated the Master of Ships' office complex first, back in the beginning. There was a passage that wound behind a wall, perfect for eavesdropping on the particular office traditionally assigned to the Master of Ships. This passage was enough to warn Stannis into giving orders to his Fleet captains on their ships at dock, where random children were obviously out of place (instead of having them meet him at the office in person to receive orders) and to make plans on ship missions and assigned docking schedules within the safety of the Foxhole or Dragonstone if necessary. But the passage had to remain open until this moment that they were waiting for, for they could not flush their quarry too soon. Patience, patience, and only when they were sure, could they make their entrapping pounce.

The administrative paperwork could safely stay in place to intimidate with sheer bulk; Royal Marine personnel records, armament supplies and maintenance records and requisitions forms, ship maintenance schedules, reports on the progress of the navigation students at the Royal Naval Academy, reports on surveyed coastlines and hazards natural and unnatural, reports on sighted pirate ship movements, reports on canned rations sent to and received and distributed from the supply depots, reports, reports, reports. Forms, forms, forms. To say nothing of the growing cadre of mapmakers to the Crown with their drafting tables spread out with their works. Selyse said that there's no privacy like that within a crowd. The same could be said of written information. Make it so that outsiders could not see the forest for the trees.

They mapped out the passages that spied upon the Small Claims Court and Master of Laws, Master of Engineering, Grand Maester, and found the passage that Selyse was sure existed within the Hand's office within the Tower of the Hand. Climbing all the way down into the deep underneath and seeing the sheer number of tunnels that branched out from the central hub they found caused Alekyne and Imry some measure of excitement. Alekyne and Imry both agreed that this was as mysterious and adventuresome as the best of Selyse's Assassin

Creed stories. Maegor's folly was mapped out, following the methods that Tyrion had written to them about his efforts at mapping out Casterly Rock.

At last, Alekyne stood watch while Imry picked the lock of the chambers of the Master of Whispers.

Selyse had hoped that Varys was not as sophisticated as her imaginings. Alekyne and Imry hoped so also. If he was capable of seeding his records with patently false information, to make his own misdirection, to in fact be wily enough to keep his records in a totally different undisclosed location, they were, as she said, screwed.

She never did say what sort of screws. Probably thumbscrews, Imry once joked.

The windowless room's air was stale as they closed the door behind themselves. Imry immediately went to investigate the stone slab bed. Alekyne went to the desk. Alekyne drew on cotton gloves and took out a magnifying glass and began pressing and prodding at the piece of furniture, opening and closing drawers.

By the time he triggered all the hidden compartments he could, Imry finished his own investigation and found the mechanism lifting the slab bed up to reveal a passage.

They set to work, pulling out the blank notebooks from their rucksacks and transcribing the papers they found within the drawers, making sure to carefully put the papers back exactly where they came from. The Florent Code was excellent for the purpose; the space they saved allowed them to pack in as much information as possible on their pages.

The only concession to trip up intruders such as themselves was that the records were all in Valyrian. Alekyne thought he would always be surprised by the depth of Selyse's foresight. She took the time to formally learn reading, writing, and speaking it on a near conversational level. When she was twelve. Imry and Erren learned because of course they saw the benefit of adding another layer of complexity to their childish secret messages left in the dead drops of Brightwater Keep. Delena learned so that she could sing songs in Valyrian. Melessa, Rhea, and he learned because for a time the books written by maesters eager to ingratiate themselves to the court of Aegon I were in Valyrian for all subjects. They were forced to learn how to read it in order to properly catalog their acquired books at the Foxhole. There were newer translations available, of course, but Selyse reasonably pointed out that not every translator was up to standard and occasionally when she showed a book to Thoros, he would agree and say that this or that noun or verb was wrong entirely. A slippery sort of language.

They worked for nights, moving from the desk to the chests of drawers in the room. They left and returned with more blank notebooks from Stannis' office. Finally, the work was done, the notebooks all safely placed in a chest in Stannis' office. Trusted men would move it to the docks, which was not unusual; things moving to and from the docks from the Master of Ships' office complex, and from there back into one of the many warehouses they controlled for their businesses within King's Landing and from there into a safehouse. None of the covert work they did was left within the Foxhole itself. As paranoid Selyse was (and therefore them) the Foxhole was not entirely suited for the purpose of hiding a covert ops set up. It was a family home. It was the true center of the Florent innovations. It was too valuable to risk.

They made sure that everything was back into position. They locked the door and shut themselves into the room. And entered the passageway revealed by the stone slab bed. They hit the panel just down the tunnel and the stone slab slid back into position.

They went deeper and deeper into the hidden depths of the Red Keep.

“I bet this is just what the Foxes felt with Farmers Boggis, Bunce, and Bean,” Imry sighed happily.

“Cool your theft cockstand,” Alekyne muttered, drawing his dagger and holding his lantern aloft. “There may still be little birds about. We may not be the only ones in the tunnels.”

“Yes, my lord,” Imry snapped back to professionalism.

It turned out that this particular tunnel eventually led back to the central hub, though not directly; it joined another tunnel instead of opening onto the hub. If one used servants’ halls in tandem, there were multiple normal gated exits. It only required servants’ livery to bypass or to be led in by a bribed servant. Robert had given House Florent permission to change the staffing and hiring policies of the Red Keep, to deeply audit and review all the myriad of common folk who made their living in the Red Keep. It was a lot of trouble given the many different ranks of servant underneath the Red Keep Steward, ranging from the lowest anonymous pot boys and scullery maids to the scribes that reported to Robert directly to write down his thoughts and responses to various reports.

It was a big, involved task and the Florents were seeing it through.

From Maegor’s Holdfast they found the single escape tunnel that sufficed for Maegor’s paranoia; it surfaced within a natural wind and water eroded cave in the cliffs of the King’s Landing promontory. The cave had been widened enough that a single file of persons could feel their way quickly forwards in the darkness towards the opening. They cautiously emerged and they were beneath the outermost walls of the Red Keep, facing the ocean. The entrance itself was partially blocked from direct view by sea by an overhang of rock.

Steps were roughly cut into the cliff face and it was treacherous footing to make their way along the promontory, fighting moments of vertigo as they went. Eventually, the steps led all the way down to the water, where the high tide forced them to swim for a little while until they were able to step onto the sparse pebbly beach of King’s Landing, outside of the walls of the city. It was here that the humblest of local fishermen and crabbers made their trade, rowing out their little boats in the early mornings.

“Well,” Alekyne hummed, his hands on his hips. “That’s a journey.”

“Imagine Queen Cersei needing to be escorted out that way in the direst of emergencies.”

“Pbbth. She’d have to be gagged beforehand. I imagine she’d start shrieking and attracting all sorts of attention. She’s just-”

“The worst!”

“Definitely!”

They took off the stag emblazoned servants’ jackets they were wearing and made their way back into King’s Landing. Ser Davos Seaworth had maintained his Fleabottom contacts. More than a few were glad to be paid in Florent coin to track the movements of Varys’ little birds and to even notice Varys’ disguised forays out into the city himself. It merely took knowing that he was in the habit of wearing disguises to be more effective at tracking his movement, to determine Varys’ own safehouses.

He was issued an invitation to join the court at Dragonstone as a courtesy. He did not partake, of course. He was too wary and canny to allow himself to be on an island where he had absolutely no inside sources and where he was ultimately unsure of his own safety.

And he had cause to worry.

“Curious that he’s saved letters from Illyrio of Pentos,” Selyse finally said, once Alekyne and Imry finished their report.

“They didn’t even really try at subterfuge,” Imry piped up. “Brother Dragon and Sister Dragon. What sort of code names are that? It’s so obvious I almost believe that the letters are dupes.”

“Except that we have independently confirmed on our own that there are two Valyrian looking youths living in Illyrio’s manse,” Alekyne shrugged. “Viserys and Danaerys’ trail from Myr ended in Pentos.”

They watched Selyse, watched as her face took on a brooding air.

“... Are they still afforded mercy?” Imry finally asked.

“I want it,” Selyse murmured. “They’ve done nothing wrong yet.”

“But we have as yet, no eyes or ears inside. It may take years to cultivate reliable sources of our own. And in that time, Illyrio could convince Viserys of anything.”

“...If we cannot be assured of intelligence regarding Illyrio’s plans then we must have him blinded and mistaken about our intentions especially,” Selyse replied. “We go forward the moment the entire court returns to King’s Landing. You are very sure that Uncle Alester will back us?”

Alekyne nodded.

“If not for the security to our House that comes from properly managed espionage, we must be ready to sow discord in Essos, even more than now. If we cannot avoid them attempting anything against us for our works and innovations alone, we must at least distract the Free Cities with each other’s old rivalries.”

“That may very well be,” Imry held up his hands. “But he will not be overly disturbed. Spices, gemstones, cheeses, dragonbone, slaves. A friendlier Braavos to Westeros, bolstered by more free trade could conceivably dedicate more resources to policing Pentos. But

amongst the magisters who might be very inconvenienced by us, Illyrio's interests are not directly affected."

"That will cause envy amongst competing magisters," Selyse considered. "Sensible merchants who are not too stubborn to move into different markets. Essosi merchants' competition is bloodier than in Westeros. And yet, also too reliant on the hiring of assassins and sellswords. I would leave chaos for chaos' sake as one of the last resorts."

"And yet, with chaos there are all sorts of opportunities," Alekyne smiled.

"Oh, to be sure. But I really would much prefer that we make and get the opportunities at our choosing instead of leaving openings for others to exploit. If they are smart enough to perceive them."

"Yes, but are the Martells smart enough to keep out of our way?" Imry lightly grinned.

"If there is one thing I can trust is that Doran's cautiousness would ever be to his House's detriment," Selyse smiled. "Which is also why we need to keep Essos quiet. If he gets disquieting news perhaps he could be persuaded into foolish action. I'm not going to risk that."

"Then can we not have him concerned with internal Dornish matters?" Alekyne suggested. "Can we not engage with the Yronwoods, the Daynes, the Fowlers?"

"Oberyn has found out about our textile mills and made contact with Uncle Alester already. It would be difficult to openly sell spinning and weaving machines to rival Houses."

"Ah, but Father has already begun negotiating with Dornish Houses nervous about their decreases in cotton income. They were faster than the Martells. We will not be releasing cotton machines to the Dornish. But the question of patented engineered linen processing machines..." Alekyne rubbed his hands. "Those that heeded Dornish merchants' concerns and reports are to be rewarded for their alacrity and dutifulness, are they not? For a price?"

"Or, we could simply take over the linen industry instead," Imry chuckled.

"Have them make competing bids for machines after we have everything fine tuned from heckling, drawing rovings, spinning, and weaving especially for flax fibers. We must have hard numbers on how many pounds of flax per day can be processed in contrast to traditional hand methods, pegged to the latest in merchants' sales prices. Volume and profits. Have bolts of linen ready to send to these lords, even the Martells, show them dyed and with patterns as demonstration. Show them what they could earn if they should cooperate with us," Selyse decided. "At minimum, we get more economic ties with the rest of Westeros from Dorne while diversifying Essosi losses. Wreck those slavers."

"You get so bloodthirsty," Imry said admiringly.

Selyse's eyes flashed.

"I have always abhorred slavery."

Alekyne and Imry smiled.

“You have the report adequately summarized for King Robert?” Selyse asked.

“Yes,” Alekyne replied. “Perfectly understandable for him.”

“Very well. I will let Stannis know. And then we move forward.”

Maester Bryan clicked his tongue to himself in distaste at the state of the book shelf in front of him. He had thought he would feel nostalgic and happy having a chance to go back delving in the Citadel Grand Library, but it was not so. There was no Order! Why, if only the Archivists and Librarians had listened to him when he first wrote to them about the Florent Decimal System! Oh, how could they disrespect a mind as brilliant as sweet, clever Selyse’s-

He sighed, his mustache twitching disapprovingly. The sound caused a novice, who was not very energetically dusting the shelf on the end of the row, to speed up and duck out of sight.

Well.

He picked up a tome on Vale herbs. He walked some more and picked up a recipe book from Dorne. He doubled back and picked up a book on turtles indigenous to the Riverlands. He browsed slowly, circling, making sure that he was not tailed, as he was taught by Imry. Dear boy. All of his Florent charges were so, so wonderful. He was blessed to have been assigned to Brightwater Keep.

He was flipping through a tome recording old epics from the North, when he felt somebody watching him.

“Yes?” he looked up.

A group of pimply Acolytes were hovering at the end of the row.

“Are you Maester Bryan? Of Brightwater Keep?” one of them whispered.

“I am,” Bryan added the book to his stack on a cart. “Why do you ask of me?”

“You wrote the treatise on cellular structures under microscopes,” one of them said in a worshipful manner.

“You wrote the treatise that established the existence of the periodic table!”

“You wrote the treatise on establishing the validity of vaccinating for poxes!”

“Could you- could you sign my copy? Please?”

Bryan nodded and spent a few minutes signing the title pages of the proffered texts. They asked questions and he answered them; it always warmed his heart when youngsters had some appetite for learning. He made sure to mention that if they had any particular tomes

they wanted to be put into print, to write to Bellflower Press; the more popular texts where, the more sense it would be to have them in print for easy purchase. Finally, the Acolytes had to take their leaves. Bryan gave a friendly wave.

He waited for a few minutes before circling and doubling back on his route again. One of them may be a spy, Imry's advice came up in his mind again. Lose them. Avoid suspicion.

He picked up books. He put books back. He pattered. He hummed under his breath. He genuinely straightened the books on a few shelves. His personal stack of books grew and shrank as he pushed his cart along.

By the time the last bell rang to warn everybody that it was time for the library to lock down for the night, he had the personal diaries of the High Septon during the waning years of Mad King Aery's reign in his lunch basket, easily hidden by a cloth and out of sight. He flowed in the crowd of gray robed maesters and acolytes, pulling his hood up. He walked off, looping and backtracking some more, until he reached his inn in Oldtown.

The security of the Library was appalling, Bryan thought to himself.

He packaged the diaries up with brown paper and string, to make ready for delivery to Brightwater Keep.

He didn't know why Selyse wanted the diaries of High Septon Maynard. He was not supposed to know why and he accepted that he would be like a raven, unknowing of the messages it carried, for good or ill. He trusted Selyse.

After this, he would be on his own for a few weeks to investigate the mood of the Citadel. Perhaps debate some doubters of his and Selyse or the rest of the Florents' work face to face. Bryan had a growing stack of contentious correspondence addressed to Brightwater Keep to the point that Bryan was releasing simple broadsheets refuting point by point all sorts of erroneous suppositions, that the Florents were happy to print en masse and have messengers go out into Oldtown, to nail these pages to the doors of various dormitories or popular taverns and pubs frequented by scholars and Maesters. Plenty were very skeptical about the calculations Rhea did for the Practical Navigator, for example. But the proof was in the pudding; the Acclaimed has made over five successful voyages so far. So there. Women can be thinkers, practical, creative. Correct.

Rhea and Selyse together took the trouble to devise and publish proper mathematical textbooks, suitably tested out by Lord Renly; he was an almost ideal test subject, for he had a lord's education from a maester, but did not have years of Selyse's idea of learning mathematics in the form of games, songs, and toy abacuses the way Omer and Merrell once did. From his correspondence with Maester Willis at the Foxhole, he learned that Renly was simply unlike Selyse or Rhea in that he could not quite grasp the higher mathematics, not until Selyse explained the applied use of math for the aiming, adjusting, and improving accuracy of catapult fire.

Renly knew well enough from discussion with Stannis that the potential of the flagship Fury's catapults were limited by the experience of the catapult crews. And most men went about it by vaguely pointing said catapults at the direction they wanted and hoping for hits

after the loosing. Renly thought it fraught with risk; forcing the Fury to anchor prior to using catapults left her vulnerable and she had limited capacity for boulders as is. It made sense to Renly that for best use, trained crews must be as precise and accurate as possible. It was no good to have catapults if nothing was hit, after all.

After that, Renly began laboriously graphing out the arcs of hypothetical boulders from hypothetical trebuchet and comparing them to the extant treatises written by engineers on the subject of warcraft with the construction and usage of such machines. He was very interested in reading up on Alekyne's existing notes regarding his work on the cammed bows. Could there be such a thing as cammed Scorpions? Perhaps not, given the strength needed to prevent the arms from shattering from the immense pressures of kinetic energy upon loosing. But that would merely require finding stronger materials, wouldn't it?

Maester Willis reported that Lord Renly was working through his and Maester Cressen's assignments at good speed and his interest in the theoretical and engineering was greatly increased. Time was, the choicest posting for a maester if one dreamed of intellectually curious masters was House Hightower. He felt immeasurably fortunate with this generation of House Florent. To think that their influence was such that a Baratheon was correctly using calculus!

Maester Bryan chuckled to himself. They were going to change the world in so many marvelous ways. His wonderful, dear charges, all of them.

To say that Robert was wroth after reading the report was an understatement. He was so mad he actually dropped to his knees within the Fury's captain's cabin and began beating the floor with his fists.

"Traitor-traitor-traitor! Scum!" Robert howled, gnashing his teeth.

Stannis waited as Robert yelled obscenities at the deck.

It was good so far in that Robert hadn't begun destroying furniture in his path yet. He kept his guard up, though; there was no saying that Robert wouldn't suddenly turn on him with his fists when in the throes of madness.

Robert finally sat up, flushed, breathing hard.

"His head. On a spike!"

"Of course, Your Grace," Stannis bowed his head.

Robert grudgingly began counting to ten, getting up on his feet.

"I suppose," Robert finally said. "That your wife and the rest of them have plans?"

"They do."

Robert growled, pacing in a tight circle.

“The dragonspawn will still be spared,” Robert sourly concluded. “Won’t they?”

“Varys did not swear an oath of fealty and office to them,” Stannis replied. “They don’t rule. You do.”

“And that’s where the Florents have him dead to rights,” Robert nodded to himself. “Very well. But let them know. I’ll be the one who does it. I chose to spare and keep him on, chose to make use of him. So I get to kill him.”

Robert made a fist.

“Of course,” Stannis bowed his head again.

Robert noticed Stannis’ approving expression and snorted to himself before sitting down heavily and pouring out some ale to drink.

“Jon has another copy of this report, I take it?” Robert asked before lifting the cup to his lips.

“Yes. He is aware.”

“Good. Good.”

They sat and the Fury rocked them as it cut through the waves on the way to King’s Landing.

“Uugh,” Robert grunted to himself. “Now I’m out a Master of Whispers.”

“We have someone for your consideration,” Stannis went over to accept another cup that Robert poured for him.

“Hah. Who?”

“Ser Colin Florent.”

Robert chuckled to himself, taking another drink.

“Ah. Well. Ser Imry not available?”

“He serves with other purpose for House Florent.”

But it impressed Stannis the same that Robert noticed Imry’s preferred talents.

“Well. Ser Colin’s not a preening lickspittle. And like as not, he knows how to go about the business. If he’s half as useful as Ser Axell, then he’s worth the risk of trusting him. Really let me know about remaining Targaryen loyalists. And better your wife’s kin than any Westerman, too!”

Imry collapsed his far-eye, which he had trained at the crow’snest of the Fury as it docked. He tucked it away and made his way down the rigging to the deck of the ship he was taking for passage from Dragonstone to King’s Landing. He went to his bag and took off his customary

fashionable jacket. He put on a nondescript gray-green woolen coat, the kind that looked like one a clerk working for a comfortably prosperous merchant could afford. It was tailored with room to conceal the strips of boiled leather that formed the inner layer. He spent the time waiting for his ship to dock going over his kit and packing it to his satisfaction. He left his feathered hat sitting atop his luggage; he exchanged it with a brown cowl.

He stepped off the gangplank and strode off, doubling and circling a few times before making his way to a dockside winesink. He searched and left. He went to another. He searched and left. At the last, he found a man. He approached, joined in with their dicing game, played a few rounds, paid for a few of their drinks, chatted and laughed and left with the man leading the way.

Coins passed hands. The man tipped his hat and left.

Imry went on, and eeled a path into an alleyway. Up he went, hopping from a barrel and clinging to a jutting piece of masonry and pushing off with his legs, clinging and climbing. He walked his way across roof ridges, unseen by the bustling crowds below going about their blithe business of the day. He found the perch he needed. He sat, watching a block of mews. And waited.

At the front part of the mews, out of his view, the man from the winesink was at work. He pushed a little girl of no more than nine years in age forward. She knocked a rhythm on the door. The door opened a little. A little was all it took. The girl spun and silently fled. The man slammed his weight against the door and a dozen other men who were waiting rushed in, weapons drawn. The boy who had opened the door was slain.

Some children escaped; they flung themselves out of the ground floor windows and scattered, wordless.

One girl managed before dying to pull with all her might upon a wire that ran through a hole in the wall. A bell sounded.

A movement.

Imry's eyes narrowed.

A mound of straw shifted, lifted up and aside by the opening of a trap door from below. A plump person climbed out into the empty stall and set off in a not very quick run, looking right and left, hastily pulling a cloak on.

Imry let his lasso fly and the noose settled over the shoulders of the fleeing person. He braced and pulled hard.

The person was thrown off his feet. Imry was on the move, making his way down with all haste; the other end of the lasso was secured to a chimney stack.

All Varys could see before a sack was thrown over his face, his breath knocked out of him, was a hooded figure, who had additionally obscured their entire face with a black knitted mask, showing only two eyes and a mouth.

In the end, it was quick. Varys' former chamber was opened and the incriminating letters from Illryio were gathered first by Imry, who had remembered precisely where they were kept in the desk of secret compartments.

The small council had an emergency convening within the council chambers. The letters were read out and examined.

King Robert pronounced his sentence without a roar or bellow. It was quiet.

Varys was brought in and made to kneel. The sack was lifted from his face. He looked around and found the hooded man, still wearing the mask.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The others in the room shifted. King Robert scowled.

"Oh, no," the hooded man replied. "I shan't be caught monologuing to the enemy."

And with that cryptic remark, the hooded man bowed to King Robert.

King Robert held his hand out to Ser Barristan and received Barristan's sword. He strode over with it and caught Varys' gaze fully before the swing.

Varys, late of Lys, died without finding out what he wanted the most to know at that moment.

Outside the Red Keep, birds sang.

Brightwater Keep: Impact

Tysha watched from beneath her lashes as Lord Alester strode into his lady wife's parler, flourishing a raven message between his fingers, a very smug smile on his face. Lady Melara took the message to read.

"Ser Colin Florent named Master of Whisperers."

Melara looked up at Alester and he raised an eyebrow and nodded. Melara flicked her hand out and every other girl and maid in the room stood to go.

"You may stay," Melara held her hand out to Tysha.

Her? Tysha had to consciously still her hands from wringing, but she remained as all the others filed out and the door was shut.

"You are not in trouble," Alester's smile became kind and he took a seat. "Be at ease."

Tysha nodded.

"... Tell me why House Florent should be so glad of this new position granted by the King," Alester said.

"Oh. I- Well. A Small Council position shows favor and trust and the rise of one of a noble House means the rise of their House in esteem, influence, and power in turn," Tysha recited.

Alester and Melara nodded. Tysha took a breath, and hesitated. Melara nodded again.

"Only, I wonder at the position. Hand of the King is most coveted. And Master of Whisperers is... not. The histories I have learned have no good things to tell of it."

"That is true. I confess, I was not raised, as all lords of the Reach are, to see the value in the covert work. Chivalry. Fairness. Justice. These are the virtues that we are told to follow and aspire to."

Tysha nodded.

"And yet. You, Tysha, understand as no other young lady in this keep, that there is terrible violence in this world. Injustice."

Tysha gulped and nodded, bowing her head.

"Why is it necessary to stick a dagger into a man's back?" Alester continued. "To do the dishonorable thing?"

"Some men don't deserve an honorable death-!" Tysha muttered.

"That's so," Melara nodded. "That's so."

Tysa's smoothed her hands on her lap, to keep them from clenching into fists.

"What do you wish of me?" Tyasha asked.

"Colin will begin the establishment of a proper system. No more Essosi mutilated children for his sources. Well. Except the ones that were convinced to betray their former master. Those will be kept on; they have no other place to go. That leaves the requirement for new persons to serve. For the security of Westeros."

"And House Florent?" Tysha added.

"We do not pretend," Alester made an elegant shrug. "That at this time what benefits the current King does not also benefit House Florent. But at the same time, dear Selyse preaches for a different kind of nobility. It is what makes her so suiting for Lord Stannis."

"Duty."

"Obligation. A raising up of many, instead of the privileged few. I'm sure you were taught about the new laws that explicitly denounce and outlaw the acts of the Mad King that started Robert's Rebellion?"

"No monarch may condemn any person sworn to them to summary execution," Tysha recited. "Which, you have taught me, means that any foreign persons who displease the King could still end up immediately getting bashed by the King's hammer."

Alester grinned.

"I do not quite agree with Selyse's liberalities," Alester shrugged. "But I must not scoff. She has been blessed so with Florys' cunning. I must be a Florent true. Wise and wary. The Reach has never been a hotbed of peasants' rebellions, not even in the worst of winter famines. Our land is bountiful and our streams and rivers teem with fish. Even the meanest of smallfolk may find succor by catching a squirrel. But it has happened in the worst of the worst winters; when the people were not fairly given rations from stockpiles and granaries as they rightfully deserved for their labor in growing and harvesting. Such lords foreswore their side of the bargain; meat and mead at their table. Always! It is, at heart, a literal thing, now made chivalrously figurative. And yet. It would do no good for House Florent to take for granted our sworn people. To be too arrogant is folly. And we are not to be fools."

Tysa agreed it was so.

"There are merchants in Essos richer than lords and able to raise armies. In time, surely there will rise such merchants here in Westeros; it is true that we may keep Florent inventions exclusive and secret, but only for so long. Greed and ambition will inevitably cause our knowledge to be taken from our complete control in time. Selyse has predicted it.

So the best we can do is hold on to and guard our patents for as long as is lawful, to continuously seek out new innovations to patent and make contracts and deals that favor our House in the future and otherwise ally ourselves with trustworthy, enterprising merchants who make us money by distributing our products. We must be diplomatic. Have them well

disposed and perhaps beholden to us in various ways. Loyal, from natural self interest and from mutual respect.”

Tysa nodded patiently.

“And so to the matter of you. Ser Colin would offer you position and duty to the realm, if you wish to take them.”

“My lord?”

“You know, deep in your bones, what it is to be a smallfolk,” Alester solemnly said. “And you have been taught the manners and ways of nobility. You are not an innocent young maiden . You have known loss and fear and many terrible things. You could be useful for the security of the realm and House Florent, if you swear to serve by the use of your ears and your wits.”

An informant! Tysa took a breath.

“Would I be sent away, my lord? My lady?”

She was not ready for such a thing, surely?

“No,” Lady Melara shook her head. “For we remember that you are precious to Tyrion Lannister. To put you in harm's way knowing this is a poor choice indeed.

You are one of many young ladies come for education into the Florent household. We have made you claim kinship to my goodbrother’s wife and that was enough to prevent the suspicions of others. And yet, with a conveniently dead father and mother, you are assumed to be of modest means, granted a small allowance for your personal use and the smallest of potential doweries, as you were not said to come from the main line of House Oldflowers.”

Tysa nodded.

“So amongst the young ladies who have come to us, it is of no question that you are not the most interesting of potential brides for prospective suitors. And this is to our design, for you are married in truth, after all.

You are shy and modest, which is understandable as a stranger taking refuge amongst us. You have applied yourself in learning manners and I am satisfied with your progress in reading and writing. And further, there is a good, sensible practicality about you, which is uncommon at all with noble girls. That is the good of being of one of the smallfolk, Selyse would say. You know what it truly means to manage a holding, not because of how much money you might get from selling off livestock or extra harvest goods, but because you wish to keep your table well with food and drink through the lean times that might come. You have caught on to the purpose of your accounting lessons very quickly indeed. You do not waste, you are not frivolous.”

Tysa blushed from this praise.

“You have a good, sensible head on your shoulders,” Melara concluded. “And may move freely amongst nobility, as visiting guest. Should the need arise, you could also move amongst the smallfolk and be unnoticed.

It would be Ser Colin’s honor to have you come into his service. Shall you consider his offer?”

Tysa was dismissed to her chamber to give her time to think. She thought longingly of crawling into her bed under the covers for comfort, but did not want to make more work for the chambermaids who had made the bed in the first place in the morning.

She sat at her writing desk and unlocked it with a key hanging from a fine chain that fastened to a loop of fabric sewn within a jacket pocket, unfolding the pulldown front down that formed the writing surface. She pulled her golden Dragon locket from underneath the front of her dress. She looked at the coin face. She could read now. The name Maekar I Targaryen showed on one side with the face of the king. On the other, there was the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen. After opening the locket, a small key dropped into her palm. This key opened a finely made wooden box she kept inside her desk with mother-of-pearl inlay depicting flowers and woodland creatures. The inside of the box was lined with brass and fitted so well that it was said that it was waterproof. Tysa had not the courage to test that claim. It was a gift sent over from Tyrion.

Inside, she kept the letters that Tyrion had sent her.

These private letters were not like the letters that Lady Melara received from her children from their far-flung locations, along with the rest of the Florent nephews and nieces.

He wrote of feelings and thoughts and wishes that she was sure nobody else knew about at all. Secrets.

The Florents did not speak with her about her letters. It would be easy, Tysa thought, for them to pry or even order her to show them the letters. She may seem a noble, but she was always going to be daughter of Denys, son of Walder, son of Rolder, farmers all. She had her past experience with Lord Tywin Lannister. She would’ve obeyed immediately. She’d learned.

The Florents were ambitious, it was true. They did not hide it at all. But they were not like other lords. They didn’t want to be like Lord Tywin. They didn’t want to hurt people. Oh, truly, it was clear that they could. And had. But that was never the first choice. They would rather bargain. And so, they have made something of a bargain with Tyrion Lannister. They had a debt from him and the value of it was unknown right now. It was a gamble. But they were willing to do it and she is part of that gamble. Tyrion and she were but youths, really. Everybody discounted Tyrion because he is a dwarf.

The Florents didn’t. They didn’t love him, not like her, but they knew he was so smart and worthy. She has begun to understand that Tyrion has a precarious position; kinslaying is a sin, but that’s only if one struck out directly with weapon in hand. There were Lannister cousins. Uncles raised as cruelly as his lord father. The whole of the Westerlands for the taking; what

was the life of a lone dwarf compared to that? Accidents could be arranged to happen. Yes, her husband was in danger.

Tysa was tired of sitting upon her hands, as powerless now as she was all her life. The Florents protected her. But all Westermen knew about the Reynes and Tarbecks. Our lord is strong, they boasted and whispered. A true lion! A beast, a beast, Tysa wanted to scream. His power was great and terrible and he turned it upon his own son. He could attack the Florents, he could war against them and the might of the Westerlands was terrible. The Florents had their own power to call upon, but he was Lord Tywin Lannister. They were not so foolish as the Reynes and Tarbecks.

Tysa was no fool. Not now.

They could not risk everything of theirs to protect her if Lord Tywin ever found out about her in truth and demanded to finish the job and have her killed. They would lie and stall and perhaps spirit her away and say she fell down a well or was taken by bandits, but there was no telling. Perhaps he would attack them anyway, for their daring, their cheek. And for that, backed into a corner? They could only turn her over to save themselves.

It was only to be expected.

Could I be of use to Tyrion by going into service and swearing an oath? Tysa wondered. Mayhaps I can. If I learn well, I might find out of any plots against him and warn him. I already spend so much time trying to overhear rumors of him. Of waiting on news from the Florents in King's Landing hosting him on his visits there.

House Florent did not befriend me without purpose. They want something from Tyrion, somehow. Yet they do show much more hospitality than expected, considering. They could have just given room and board; they did not have to educate me. And now they have given me a chance to be useful to them and at the same time, him. Lannisters pay their debts. I was made a Lannister by Tyrion. So.

I will pay my debt to the Florents. And protect Tyrion too at the same time.

It would be, as the Florents say, Win-Win.

The next day, Tysa waited for a free moment to speak with Lord Alester in his solar. It took a lot of patience; she usually had no such reason to seek him out and of course she did not want to attract the attention of the other girls on this day.

There was a full class of young people. Cousins to the main line Florents of various stripe from other Houses. Tysa has begun to consider them, in advance of notifying Lord Alester.

There was Elinor Peake; her mother was a Lannister. What luck! Or, Tysa paused. The Florents must have reason to seek her out to educate and influence. The same for Simon Ball, who was a second son.

Hm. All the current crop of fosters were too old for potential matches for Alekyne's unborn babe, Tysa considered, as she worked her way through her math exercises during morning

class. It must be something else.

Perhaps the Florents were carefully finding out how open the other two branch Houses that sprung from Florys' marriages would be to their plans. Past marriages had women exchanged between the three often enough, to reinforce the Gardener claim. House Ball might be more pliable than Peake, perhaps. Didn't they earn great wrath from the Targaryens during the Blackfyre rebellions? Quite a drop. That coincided with a wise, cautious shunning from the past generations of Florents who were Targaryen loyalists in terms of marriage offers. House Ball would be eager to grasp for more, to rise given a chance during a new Baratheon dynasty.

It would be good, Tysha thought as she got to the last row of math problems, for her to find out if there were other children of Westermen nobles here. Elinor's mother being a Lannister, no matter how much a minor cousin (or even a Lannisport Lannister) meant letters to and from her kin in the west. News. Rumors.

She finished the problems and walked up to the front to drop off her slate.

"Lord Alester is expecting me in his solar," she told the math tutor. "I expect to be back in time for history lessons."

The man nodded and Tysha left the room. The other girls and boys looked at her with casual curiosity as she left. There was some jealousy about how much time Lady Melara spent with Tysha. After all, there were Crane cousins present and a Varner boy too. But Tysha was luckily one of the eldest and was afforded some respect from that.

She remembered how nervous she was, left by herself amongst these young lordlings and ladies, who peppered her with questions at first about where she had come from and why hadn't they known of her before meeting her. She retold the story set up by the Florents; her father was a Ser Girard Oldflowers, who fought in the War of the Ninepenny Kings. Before leaving to fight, he traveled about, trying to earn some renown and coin at smaller local tourneys. He'd made his way into the Westerlands and had met her mother, a daughter of another knight. They fell in love and married there. He left for war and did not return and Tysha had no memories of him. Her mother raised her until she died of consumption. Before that could happen, her mother had managed to write a letter to Lord Oldflowers, hoping that he would take Tysha in. She was ever so grateful, Tysha recited, for the generosity of Lord Oldflowers in recognizing their kinship.

Some of the other children were doubtful, of course, though most took her at her word. (Nevermind that according to Imry, the timing didn't make sense. If she truly was a daughter of a knight who died in the War of the Ninepenny Kings, she'd be older in age) It helped that the Florents dressed her as soon as possible in Oldflowers colors; dresses of dark green and jackets of white, trimmed in red piping and gifting her an enamel brooch, a circle of dark green with a central white hand with a band of red crossing the palm that she always remembered to wear everyday.

A Westerman mother explained all her own Westerman ways; the songs she knew were different from the songs traditionally heard in the Reach. A daughter of a household knight, respectable enough for a landless knight as the purported Ser Girard Oldflowers to marry for

love would not have been able to afford to teach her finer manners. Her ignorance of the Reach was easily excused by her not knowing her father and keeping close to tend to an ill mother.

She was desperate to learn and blend in and any missteps or low moods from her perceived failures were brushed away as homesickness and grief over the death of her mother.

The Florents lied and lied and lied for Tysha.

She could not estimate how much of a debt she owed them. Maybe she could talk to Tyrion about it, one day, and come to a reckoning.

She came to the door of Lord Alester's solar and a Florent guard announced her. She was let into the room.

"Ah, Tysha," Lord Alester looked up from a ledger and gestured towards the more casual sitting area with a low table and upholstered armchairs in the new style from Dragonstone. "Sit, sit. Tisane?"

"Yes, thank you, my lord."

She consciously lowered herself into the armchair with grace of movement, as taught by Lady Melara, folding her hands neatly on her lap. Alester called for a fresh hot tisane and joined her at the armchair opposite. When the tisane arrived, it came with sliced cheeses and cold cut meats arranged on toasted bread and there was even an assortment of sweet pastries. She nodded in thanks as Lord Alester filled her cup and placed a number of the snacks on a plate for her.

Alester took a drink and looked at her expectantly.

"I wish to serve. I will swear an oath of service to Ser Colin."

"You know your mind," Alester smiled. "That is very good indeed. Explain your reasoning."

Tysha explained over sips and bites of the snacks.

"You perceive and understand," Alester concluded and smiled, this time showing his teeth sharply. "Very good, very good! Yes. Yes, young Tysha. If it was not Tyrion Lannister, you would have remained in obscurity. We had purpose not entirely charitable. It would not be surprising if we earned no gratitude from you for it."

"Ser Imry could not promise justice for me and Tyrion," Tysha replied. "But he did promise that House Florent would try. To do... what you could. And it seems that right now, with both your brothers in good positions in King's Landing, your children and niece married well, and your House's inventions and industries prospering, there is much that House Florent could do. But carefully."

"Yes, carefully. You do understand that what you may learn in the future, must first be reported to Ser Colin and perhaps not even reported or hinted, to your husband?"

Tysa balked. She hesitated before finishing a sip from her cup.

“My lord? Even if there was clear and- and present danger to him?”

“In the direst of emergencies, I would not begrudge a loving wife’s actions,” Alester conceded. “But if you should find out some conspiracy afoot amongst the gossip you gather here in the Reach concerning the West, it is best that you report and Ser Colin find collaborating accounts from his informants within the West. A single rumor is not fact.”

Tysa nodded.

“Now,” Alester stood up and went to his desk, where he opened a drawer and took out a parchment document. “It is time. Read this, take it to heart. I will serve as witness to you swearing service to Ser Colin in his duties as Master of Whisperers and the Seven Kingdoms by oath, signature, and thumbprint. And then, we shall begin with new lessons for you that will aid you in your duties.”

Willas Tyrell carefully gripped the inside handle of the wheelhouse’s door as he maneuvered himself out of it. His sworn sword gripped the elbow of his left arm; it would not do to slip and shame himself further by landing face first onto the ground. Once he had firm footing, he leaned on his cane as he looked around.

Grandmother ordered him to see Bellflower Town for himself; Father would invariably enrage her with the most shallow of observations and further duped by any hospitality offered by Lord Florent in the form of good food and drink. As future Lord Paramount, she hissed to him, he had to know the threat to their House’s position for himself. Not even depending upon reports from various of their own household knights who were free to travel. With some luck, he would be underestimated by that arrogant Lord Florent into thinking that Willas was as... simple... as his father and not a threat at all as the heir.

Left unsaid was how Willas had learned the painful lesson that everybody was prone to overlooking cripples.

Well. So he was a cripple. If he could use it to his advantage, then he shall.

Servants had been sent ahead of Willas’ retinue to seek out the best of the inns or the newer, King’s Landing styled eateries for his refreshment. It gave him an excuse to linger and investigate this culmination of Florent works.

The first signs that he saw himself were the boundary markers to Florent lands. It used to be that one knew the border by twin stone foxes sitting upon tall pedestals, on either side of the road. Here in the now, the Florents built up a single guard tower within view of the road that also served as a signal tower. It would be expected, as a coastal Reacher House, that they had signal towers along their coastal border. They expended funds and labor on their inland approaches from the road that branched off the Roseroad. The tower was rounded with a long mast rising up from the center holding the signaling arms. It was painted with blaring orange and white horizontal stripes. Unmissable. As his wheelhouse approached, he could see the

arms moving, undoubtedly informing Lord Florent that he was on the road. When his retinue stopped to water and feed their horses, he had the opportunity to stick his head out of the wheelhouse window to look at the tower.

It had a crenelated roof and he could see bowmen looking down upon them. The lowermost windows were traditional slit windows preventing easy entry by assailants. The upper windows had wooden shutters that could be barred and glass (glass!) panes. The door to the tower was iron-banded and undoubtedly reinforced well on the inside. A stone carving of a fox's head looked down upon the road from the capstone of the tower's stone doorway. He waited and asked for a report from the captain of his guard as they left. He had ordered the tower guards to allow his men in for an inspection.

"There are horses at the ready kept at the stable," the captain said. "It is their purpose to ride out and alert the closest villages should this tower come under attack."

"For evacuation?"

"And mustering," the man looked concerned. "The tower has a floor dedicated as an armory."

"Armory?"

"It is so, my lord. Scores of halberds. Furthermore, the stairs to the second floor are not proper stone stairs but made out of wood and made so that they may draw it upwards by cranks and counterweights to thwart entry if they wished. Another floor serves as a food store with barrels of water and ale and stacks and stacks of canned supplies, hard cheese wheels, and entire hams. I have visited holdfasts with keeps less well prepared than that mere signal tower."

As they made their way further into Florent lands, those orange and white striped towers were visible in the horizon, situated where possible on the apex of hills away from the road; most roads naturally followed valleys or level land where possible. The amount, height, and spacing of the towers were such that Willas had to assume that each were fitted with far-eyes. Willas kept count of each tower and the idea of the Florents having such means as to equip their signal towers with far-eyes in addition to manning them with defensive guards was daunting indeed.

The same could be said by the quality of the paved roads that branched off from the Roseroad into Florent lands. Even now there were lords that did not wish to spare the expense or workers to improve their holdings' internal roads, depending instead on the paved (by order of the King) Roseroad, the majority funded by Tyrell funds and built by Tyrell laborers. Florent spared comparably no expense. The same with Lord Tarly. Between the two Houses, they straddled the Roseroad and both could very quickly muster forces and have them traveling at great speed indeed to their borders and cutting off any approach by opposition by Roseroad.

The Redwyne and Hightower fleet would of course helm the Florents in by sea, but the coastal signal towers would ensure that they could not be surprised. It is fortunate indeed that the Florents had no proper harbor for war galleys. There were concerning reports, though, that Lord Florent was renovating and expanding on a wharf that previously was only large

enough for local fishermen's boats. Instead of engaging the services of Redwyne or Hightower shipwrights, they chose to exercise their connections to the royal family and commissioned a sailing ship from the Royal Shipyard in Wendwater, a ship modeled after the *Acclaim* and her sisters. The so-called cause was to allow for more frequent visits to Alekyne's wife Dacey's homeland of Bear Island. Grandmother scoffed heartily at that, to be sure.

Building out the wharf to serve a ship even half the size of the *Acclaim* (suitable for family travel) made it large enough for merchants' cogs. They were going to attract merchants that did not want to pay Old Town's docking fees or gate tolls nor middlemen who shipped Florent goods by barge down the Honeywine River. And why should Lord Florent go by half measures? He would build out his wharf large enough for Iron Islands Trading Company ships to dock. The better for loading up his wares.

As comparatively a small amount of forces the Florents could raise, Lord Tarly's experienced men at war and all their assorted allies by blood and business made them formidable indeed. And Tyrells did not have the bloodthirstiness of the Lannisters or even the Starks to bring to bear. And the Florents never, never gave any sign of being more contentious now than in the past.

It was not the Reacher way. Willas thought that certainly this would matter more when it came to how to maneuver Lord Florent than Grandmother's nervous grumbling about the Baratheon appetite for violence and vengeance. Father made a temporary mistake, that was all. Surely, once Grandmother and Father determined who should be his wife (certainly somebody who would bolster Tyrell martial power) and his brothers' marriages things will balance out once again in the Reach, with their House secure. Florent's opportunities were all played out with his own children now and his fool of a son wed for love an impoverished Mormont! Surely the Florent problem would not last once Alekyne followed his father in assuming lordship.

His leg pained him and he had to ride in his lightest-weight litter chair.

Here in the middle of town, Willas compared it to Oldtown and found it disconcertingly showing very well in comparison indeed despite the small size.

The Florents chose the bank of the river as the site of their town. The paved road branched; one would lead to Brightwater Keep itself while the other went onward to the town. One passed the castle to get to town; with regular patrols by household knights it was clear that bandits would find Bellflower Town a tough nut to crack. Along the river bank there were numerous waterwheels, and Willas could not imagine that so many grain mills were needed. It was strange.

The entire town was neatly laid out as only a town that was ordered into being by a careful lord could be. Despite the ongoing construction he could see with different buildings, it was attractive. The Freys, Willas thought, would recognize a fellow need for symmetry and proportion. The central paved road led to the water itself and crossed the river by what looked like a stone bridge (it wasn't made out of stone at all, but concrete), one with a graceful arching span. It had a roof that covered the whole thing, which would serve well to shelter defending archers and crossbowmen in all weather. On either end of the bridge there were tall

guard towers. One had a bell tower, clearly for alerting the townspeople of danger and the other was a signal tower, part of a series that would pass on messages from the coast.

There were docks for barges near the far side of the bridge; it was clear the Florents weren't going to miss a chance at collecting their own bridge tolls and docking fees, no matter how insignificant the traffic. It made sense, as the sheer amount of buildings with waterwheels on the townside shore made docking infeasible anyway. The shoreline was further protected by walls between the buildings.

The town was arranged around a central plaza square and the formation of buildings and streets were neat, straight, ordered. In the center of the plaza there was a fountain, made in the three-basin style of King's Landing's renovated public fountains. There was a raised circular central basin for a waterfall spill and in the middle of that an oversized bronze fox statue reared on its hindlegs, a forepaw raised in playful greeting, its jaws parted in a joyful grin. There were five-petaled bronze flowers sculpted to form a wreath worn around the fox's neck.

Adjacent to the fountain was a permanent covered marketplace building; shoppers and merchants alike could be sheltered from inclement weather by a stand alone loggia that would be familiar to a Dornish person. It was a graceful structure with square columns supporting arches and a tiled roof. There were statue niches inset into the largest columns holding up the loggia's corners and one niche facing the plaza already had a marble statue of Lord Alester. On the column's other niche was a statue of Alekyne, depicted holding a pen and a drafter's straightedge tool. Another niche had... the lady in question was depicted with an open book and pen in her hand. Who-? Willas limped his way over. The inscription at her feet said this was a likeness of Selyse Baratheon. Strange. Why would Lord Florent honor his niece so? A shield was carved to be leaning against her knee and it depicted the rearing stag of Baratheon. Ah. Currying favor with her husband, no doubt. Sharing that column was another niche around the corner. That lady was holding an abacus and pen. And she was Rhea Royce, judging from the shield at her feet.

The loggia's market itself explained the necessity of shielding from rain; the merchants' stalls were a fantasy of fabrics in all the different colors one could imagine. Bolts and racks of the stuff, bright and cheerful, plain and Errenized, narrow ribbons and wide yardages, in cotton and wool, along with spools and spools of thread ranging from the finest Errenized cotton for embroidery to the thickest wool suitable for knitting. It was wonderful. It was something to envy, as Willas observed the coins changing hands.

Outside the loggia there were other market stalls that did not need such especial protection; dry goods and smaller wares and foodstuffs.

The streets themselves were also different compared to any others he had ever known. Paved, of course, four ox-carts wide such that should a driver pull to the side to stop for unloading, for example, cart traffic would not be blocked. On either side of the street, extending from the base of the buildings there were raised pavements with a curb that prevented the dung from livestock and horses from getting kicked into the way of pedestrians. The people on foot could walk on these raised... sidewalks, and not dirty themselves with muck. These sidewalks were additionally wide enough for a group of four standing shoulder to shoulder to

pass comfortably. Every so often, Willas noted iron drain grates inset into the base of the curbs, presumably to catch overflow from rains to prevent the streets from flooding.

Willas had not thought that so many buildings of a town not even ten years old could be made of stone. The cost to buy quarried stone and to transport it; what expense! They were coated in very smooth white lime plaster and had clay tiled roofs instead of reed or straw thatching or wooden shingles. Grandmother Olenna was sure something underhanded was happening when no reports of heavy ox-drawn carts of stone were observed going down the Roseroad. (What Willas could not know was that almost all of the town's buildings and the town walls were actually built out of concrete cinder blocks, which accounted for ease and speed of construction.)

Not only that, he would have expected there to be two-storied buildings at most. The central plaza square was surrounded by buildings at four or five stories in height with shops at the ground floors, expanding the opportunities for business. Many took advantage of the fabrics available to have custom folding awnings affixed for shade or shedding rain from customers walking by on foot. Building windows had wooden shutters and window rails painted in blues or oranges, depending on taste. Some of the buildings were clearly residential; balconies facing the plaza had lines of washing hanging out to dry and held pots of decorative flowers or culinary herbs for personal use. There was a new sept on one side of the plaza that looked to be made out of marble with stained glass windows! Across the plaza opposite, a stately building that seemed with official purpose bustled with activity. There were Florent guards posted. Willas had his guard captain inquire.

It was a town hall, a building of myriad uses. The large central room was such that it could be used for feasting; once a moon the townspeople were treated to a community assembly where sponsored local bakers, cooks, and brewers provided food and drink and any mummers present were hired to play dances by the Florents. So regularly scheduled was this that the more poor amongst the townspeople, rural smallfolk from surrounding villages, or even Brightwater Keep's staff planned for those days to be for their own personal celebrations. Many frugal couples married on those community assembly days, where multiple couples made merry procession to the sept, the septon cheerfully conducted their weddings, and then the couples with family, friends, well wishers, and lucky bystanders filed into the town hall, where they could feast and dance until the dawn of the next day.

To the sides of the hall there were rooms suitable for holding meetings between merchants and guild members in conference and confidence. To the back there were offices of the tax collector serving Lord Florent directly; more guards were posted. It was so necessarily well guarded that money changers also set up there and traveling merchants with more precious merchandise could store their goods or their money chests after a day of business for a fee.

The town was purpose-built to facilitate everything about the Florent fabric trade.

Willas was carried over to an eatery that he was assured catered to the most discerning of visitors to town. Upon entry, he found himself in a dining hall as fine as a lord's. The tables had tablecloths, flatware, and cups were arranged as if ready for honored feast guests. Each table held a small vase with fresh flowers. There were oil paintings adorning the clean white plaster walls and the wooden floor was polished. Wealthier merchants, judging from their

clothes and some with prosperously plump bellies, sat quietly eating and drinking. No rowdy inn was this! Willas was led to a table and the servant pulled back a chair for him.

“Shall my lord require me to read the day’s choice of fare?” the man softly, in the manner of the most discreet and professional of servants, murmured. “Or will the lord read for himself?”

A man capable of reading, just for an eatery servant! Astounding!

“I will read,” Willas said, arranging the napkin (they offered napkins!) on his lap.

The servant bowed and offered a thick sheet of paper to Willas and retreated to a respectable distance, where he stood at the ready.

Willas touched the paper and marveled at the printed text he saw there. Print, for an eatery! Even at the better coaching stops and inns along the Roseroad, one expected the servers to recite the day’s offerings.

Here, there were cooked meals; various meats seasoned with Reach-grown herbs. Tarragon chicken. Chicken braised in red wine. Simmered duck with cherries. Local river fish pan-fried in butter. If one wanted, they could have a meal with courses; Florent onion soup and a salad, snails in honey and butter, a selection of cheeses and fresh fruit, and desserts of custards, sweet tarts, or slice of pie. On offer were tisanes, tea, and wines both red and gold. It was all in print, along with the prices. It was all very new, very different.

Willas raised his head and caught the eye of the server, who approached and stood at the ready. He made his order and the man bowed, recited his order back and left with quiet efficiency. He returned shortly to pour out wine and retreated again to attend to other guests. Willas looked around and observed how the merchants conducted themselves. He was given looks of recognition and curiosity; he was unmistakable with his cane and the gold and green rose brocade of his jacket and the large golden rose cloakpin. But just as quickly, their eyes lowered respectfully and they averted their gazes, not gawking like the lower orders of smallfolk. These people knew about discretion. They had some sense of courtesy.

When the meal arrived, everything was set out very nicely indeed and Willas was left comfortably alone. He ate and enjoyed the flavors more than he expected, given that this was a public eatery. The cooks were good. Very good indeed. How strange it was, to eat so finely at such an establishment instead of in some wealthy lord’s castle! How was this possible?

He inquired with the server and was told that the cook came trained from Brightwater Keep itself; the Head Cook of the castle was hale and hearty and not likely to leave their position and this ambitious cook was experienced enough to be willing to leave and take on the business risk of opening their own establishment, with the blessing of the Florents. Extraordinary.

Willas left the eatery after payment and ordered that his litter chair be carried at a most leisurely pace in a circuit around the plaza. Time to explore.

He found a house of healing and midwifery; the corps of midwives and their apprenticing assistants paid visits to various local villages on regular routes, dispensing care. As women

neared their time, they could even make use of a stable of ponies and quick, light wagons to carry them into town; the signal towers were used to call for and direct the wagons. Adjoining was an apothecary, where behind a counter there was an impressive wooden cabinet of many little drawers and rows of shelves filled with mysterious jars filled with ingredients that could help with a cough, reduce a fever, soothe aches and pains.

There was a public school for the children of the town and mill workers. There was a daycare, where women mill workers could leave their babies and toddlers safely with wetnurses and caregivers during the workday. There was an adult school, where after work hours, workers could learn their letters and numbers in turn. There was a washerwoman's collective (not a guild, as there wasn't truly some trade secret skill involved) that washed workers' clothes and bed linens. There was a bathhouse. There were very many barrels for the purpose of collecting stool and urine for composting or the use of the local dyers. The streets were kept clean of livestock and horse dung with dung carters who collected the refuse for composting. There were accountants' offices. There were law scholars; men of Oldtown who had earned their link for Law at the minimum and were selling services to merchants for the drafting of contracts.

There was a civil court, where issues between smallfolk could be addressed more quickly than by audience with Lord Alester, using the advocacy of these same law scholars. Willas was told that Lord Alester had found and hired on very learned law scholars away from Oldtown, the ones that could prove with written testing records and recommendations from the Archmaester of Law especially to serve as judges for issues such as a yeoman accusing a neighbor of livestock theft or two merchant families disputing over the dispensation of a daughter's dowry in the form of coin or personal goods. The advocates would take up cases, look up precedents, make arguments and then the judges would deliberate and dispense judgements. Willas was skeptical of the idea, but apparently, smallfolk who did not agree with outcomes could take it up with Lord Florent for an overruling, but the risk was that if Lord Florent found that he did not disagree with the judge given good research and casemaking, he would levy a fine for wasting his time at the least or worse.

Everybody seemed to agree that given Lord Florent's even temper and generosity that to risk "or worse" was the height of folly and much to be avoided.

There was a bookstore. Inside there were mostly printed books, though one could sell copies in script and request a printed copy instead. There was even, and Willas could barely believe it, a subscription library! Interested persons could pay a fee to cover the duration of a yearly membership and enter a building with reading rooms and rows upon rows of books, where they may read at their leisure. They couldn't take books out of the building, but the sheer generosity of the Florents was passing strange! To allow strangers to paw at books that they must surely own!

In the evenings, after the merchants cleared out of the loggia market, mummers could set up underneath and entertain the townsfolk with plays or music.

He found that Lord Florent had ordered household knights and more experienced men-at-arms to train the men of Bellflower Town once a week at either archery or crossbow handling and every other week the men of town had a training muster in a field outside of town where

they would train at halberds and marching maneuvers. There was a zealousness that Wilas would have expected from Lord Tarly, not easygoing Lord Florent. It really was worrying.

But think, Willas thought to himself. Did it not make sense that Lord Florent would take such precautions, given the commerce that was happening on his lands? The arming and training of the city guards of Oldtown caused no concern for it was a city with a city charter and Lord Hightower must needs defend his seat, his city, the Citadel, and the sea lanes. What could it be besides foresight on the part of Lord Florent on behalf of his little town? Rumor and tales would be carried elsewhere by the wagging tongues of merchants. The town was close enough at three to four miles away from Brightwater Keep that a company of knights riding hard could come to its aid in less than thirty minutes. Despite that, greed could push the daring and violent.

This new town was a tempting target, no doubt. A large enough company of bandits who scouted ahead of time would try to take the town hall, a grand prize holding the taxes collected for the day and where the money changers and a few merchants kept their coins for the day.

Waiting for them, however, was Bellflower Town's defensive walls and bastions. They enclosed what seemed like about a square mile (Ambitious! How many thousands did Florent plan to pack into his town, to make it into a proper city!?) Two bastions flanked the town gate and Willas wondered at their severely angular shapes as they approached. Could they be like... fox ears? It could explain their shape. Willas noted the sheer number of arrow slits of the bastions and the shadows of scorpions emplaced on top. The whole town was additionally bounded by a wide defensive dry moat outside the walls; they had to cross a drawbridge. Excess excavated dirt was formed into packed, also triangular mounds on the far side of the moat, spaced such that they might funnel attackers towards where the bastions' defenders could rain down all manner of destruction from above. One such mound was placed in the middle towards the approach to the town's gate itself, preventing easy use of a battering ram. It forced a split to the paved road going into town and with advance warning, Willas could imagine waiting troops of archers on the mounds, good enough for defensive volleys before being forced to retreat over the moat to stronger defensive positions behind the town walls. Bellflower Town had its own armory and having the townsmen protect their town made sense, to buy time along with the town's guards.

And even getting past that formidable gate, there was that stretch of undeveloped land standing between the town walls and the cluster of new buildings closer to the river banks. They were being worked as farming fields for now. Open land, good enough for a last defensive cavalry charge, to say nothing of a proper mustering of halberd wielding locals trained in moving in step, standing firm against charging horses, and motivated to defend themselves.

During the town's planning, blocks of land lots were surveyed and set aside especially for development by merchants as incentive to do business in Bellflower Town. Land leases for the duration of 49 years (seven by seven, an auspicious amount) to be renegotiated afterwards or sold on and a preferred discount for the use of cinder blocks and standardized architectural plans for houses accounted for the uniformity. Richer merchants could see the benefit of speculatively building out joined up townhouses on multiple lots leased, to rent out to

professional families who arrived later to town and wished for ready-for-move-in housing at slightly higher rents to cover the original land lease and a little bit of additional profit for themselves. And Lord Florent sat pretty, collecting total rents all the while from the 49-year-lessees. Said funds were being pooled for the purpose of paying for town improvements and services including the town wall.

Willas finished his friendly interrogation of the captain of the Bellflower Town guards and turned around.

To face a smiling Lord Alester Florent, standing with an expectant air. Well. Not directly behind him, his sworn swords would not have allowed that. But Willas was startled nonetheless.

“Lord Willas,” Alester doffed his hat gracefully and swept a bow. “You honor me this day with a visit to my humble little Bellflower Town!”

Willas graciously nodded back, scoffing to himself at the false modesty of Lord Alester calling Bellflower Town little. Willas looked around quickly and saw that Lord Alester’s horse was being held by his own pair of personal guards, far enough away for a measure of discretion and no other retinue. He had ridden very quickly from Brightwater Keep to meet with him. Willas was forced to concede that the signal tower of Bellflower Town was annoyingly useful indeed.

“Well met,” Willas replied. “You have accomplished much in this place.”

“It was the work of many,” Alester replied and something about the acknowledgement of others made Willas uneasy.

There was nothing for it. Willas straightened as much as he could and looked Alester square in the eyes and said, with as much authority as a seventeen year old youth with not very much practice could muster, that he would tour the mills of this town.

He had expected some measure of resistance from Lord Alester, some jealousy over the new source of wealth to his house. But it was not so. Without changing his pleasant, faintly smug expression (how his Grandmother loathed the man’s face!) Alester waited until Willas was secure in his litter chair and carried over to one of the large long buildings. All such buildings had guards in Florent uniforms standing at alert.

Willas watched curiously as Lord Alester tipped his hat, allowing the guards to fully see his face.

“Good day, men,” Alester greeted. “I present Lord Willas Tyrell as guest this day.”

A guard at the barred door pulled on an outside chain by the doorway and it rang a bell in the inside. In the middle of the door, a panel opened, showing a face on the other side.

“My lord, how many will enter?”

Lord Alester turned.

“If I may advise, my lord?” Alester mentioned. “There is not so much room within to easily maneuver, given your chair.”

Ah. Willas suppressed a grimace. He decided upon the two who were carrying the chair and one of his sworn swords to follow. The door was finally opened and Willas wondered at the need for such security. But it made sense; his grandmother had such suspicions!

They entered into a foyer, where there was a tall, wood, unornamented Lannister clock. A woman was seated at a desk, surrounded by paperwork, writing away. She lifted her eyes, dipped her head in acknowledgement, and continued to work. Willas was taken aback by this lack of ceremony, but Lord Alester did not take notice, moving through the building with clear familiarity. They climbed the stairs to the second floor. The lower floor of the mills had narrow windows in the old defensive style that prevented anybody from climbing in, let alone looking in and finding out what was inside; only the upper floors had larger glass paned windows. The ground floors served as warehousing for the finished goods. Upper floors were for production.

“Ah, let us show you some products with color, shall we? This room-”

Alester opened a door and Willas entered a long room, with a double row of looms facing each other. Women worked away and Willas ruefully thought to himself that he did not know anything at all about weaving. For all he knew, this was merely Lord Florent choosing to allocate the labor of his lands differently; by freeing up women by having them leave their young children under care and their older children occupied at school (why bother educating smallfolk?) it would allow for more women to weave.

“Has a number of striped cloth and gingham in progress. Cotton. Very popular. Good day, weavers!”

“Good day, Lord Alester!” the women chorused back, not stopping their rhythm.

Willas could only say if asked that he saw the warp threads going up and down from pushes of levers low on the floor controlled by the womens’ feet and thump and clack of the mechanisms they were working with their hands. He did not know what he was looking at, though he could understand the purpose. He approached the nearest weaver to observe. The woman pulled on a handle connected to a dangling cord that Willas had difficulty distinguishing from the rest of all the thread and rope and whatnot holding the entire loom together. There was a darting movement across that caused a sharp clack. And then the woman would pull a horizontal swinging board frame towards herself, making a thump. From what he could tell, this was to firmly press the newest thread, the... weft? Into position.

“How many weavers do you employ?”

“Oh, fifty, at least,” Alester did not hesitate. “In this building.”

Willas could not help the surprise on his face; Lord Alester had that much available labor? How was that possible? And what of the other buildings in this town?

“I wish to see some... fancier fabrics,” Willas tried.

Alester was very agreeable. They had to leave that particular building which seemed to only have the more simple of patterns. The next building they entered was something different indeed, which amazed Willas and left him entranced.

The weavers at these looms were turning out the custom brocade patterns that were so coveted at Highgarden and by other lords. Willas approached one loom and watched as a pattern of black prancing stags amongst black foliage on bright yellow background emerged on a fabric using shiny, fine threads that had the sheen of satin. He looked around, trying to figure this marvel out and could only notice that a moving belt of wooden cards with holes punched into them in various ways must account for this difference to these looms. That, and the sheer amount more of warp threads, lifting and dropping into position, using a series of hooks and weights so complicated that he could not understand how it was not being hopelessly tangled.

“We have current commissions, to ensure no waste,” Lord Alester said, surveying the room with great satisfaction. “Granted, there is no danger of the Baratheon brocade going out of fashion, is there?”

You don’t have to remind me of Father’s mistake, Willas snarled in his mind. I know! We all know!

“What would it take,” Willas piped up, “to have looms such as these at Highgarden?”

Lord Alester made a cutting gesture at one of the higher ranking mill workers, a supervisor of some sort, and she blew a whistle, a pattern of three blasts. In a trice, all work was stopped and the weavers filed out of the room, many staring at Willas in curiosity. The doors shut behind them. Willas shifted. He hoped his leg wouldn’t start aching, not now.

“Bellflower’s looms will not be taken,” Alester’s voice was quiet and matter of fact. “By anyone. My lord.”

That was not what he meant at all!

“I meant that looms such as these would be worth purchasing,” Willas tried to keep his voice level.

“They are,” Alester agreed. “Yet you must understand that outside of my desire to keep these looms, there are other considerations.”

“And what may those be?”

“House Florent has applied for and gained royal patent from the Seven Kingdoms Patent Office. It’s quite the idea, really. Tyrion Lannister applied for his clocks, you see. So of course we had to investigate what the fuss was all about and well...”

Alester reached out and patted a loom with a smile.

“The Patent Office promotes the progress of science and useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries

for the duration of twenty years.”

He paused, looking at Willas, and Willas was embarrassed at what must be obvious confusion on his face.

“The Crown will enforce,” Alester’s tone was cautionary. “House Florent’s right to pick and choose how many of these looms may be built, as these are our ideas. And we wish for exclusivity. We have twenty years to enjoy that. All others will be welcome to approach us on the subject of purchase after that time.”

Left unsaid was that the price would be dear indeed, considering how many others would be interested in such looms. Willas supposed he could force Lord Tarly to reveal how much it cost him for his looms, but it was not said that these new Westerosi brocades came from Tarly’s mills; just the usual stripes, gingham, dots, and other less complicated patterns. He was also nervous (though it shamed him so) at the prospect of confronting Lord Tarly. Randyll Tarly was so fierce, so combative, so boorish that he would not take the courtesy to ignore Willas’ lame leg. He was just the sort of man who crossed his arms in order to flex his biceps purely to vex with intimidation while staring at Willas’ leg, daring him to do something about it. And unfortunately, Willas got intimidated, no matter how Grandmother scoffed at such foolish male antics.

Oh, if only Father didn’t go about saying that it was his battle strategies that won the Reach a victory against King Robert at Ashford! To not acknowledge that it was Lord Randyll’s on the field command that made the difference was a slight against him and his training and the honor of his House as First in Battle and Lord Randyll would not forget, though he would not say anything outright. Possibly the only instance of diplomacy the man had ever had the notion to practice. Everybody knew! It put Willas on the backfoot now!

“There isn’t anything stopping anybody else from setting up weaving mills of this type,” Willas said with some temper. “A bunch of looms and workers, that’s not patented, is it?”

“Oh, of course not,” Alester shook his head. “Having many workers in one place doing work isn’t new. Quarries. Mines. It’s ancient, no doubt. It’s just... amusing, isn’t it, that nobody thought to do the same for spinning and weaving.”

“Then you shan’t be surprised by new weaving mills opening, will you?” Willas challenged.

“Not at all, my lord. It was only a matter of time.”

Willas could not understand why Lord Alester was so calm about it. He thought to himself that he should order Maester Lomys to begin work on recreating the looms that could make brocade also. It was just luck that the Florents had a maester capable of thinking up such a thing as that. How difficult could it be?

“And when you do open those mills, I shall have to pay a visit, to see how you’ve gone about it, hmm?” Alester tilted his head.

Willas’ leg was aching fiercely.

“Of course,” Willas replied. “You have let me see the secret of your brocade looms after all.”

Alester nodded and smiled once more. Willas disliked it very much.

“These brocade looms are wondrous,” Willas complimented finally. “You are most fortunate.”

“Yes, I give thanks to the Smith every day,” Alester responded.

His subsequent silence was encouraging, waiting for more inquiries. But unfortunately, Willas had not any idea of what more he ought to ask. There was only the suspicion that came from Lord Alester’s easy acceptance of the idea of Highgarden setting up their own competing weaving mills. Why? The arrogance! And yet, the surety there must mean something. As far as Willas could compare, Lord Florent must think any challenge to his weaving mills was no challenge at all; like an experienced knight readying himself to face a green squire in a training yard.

“Shall we continue on? There are so many other of my mills that I have not shown you, after all,” Alester offered.

Willas gamely agreed. He was shown into a spinning mill, where a waterwheel powered rows and rows of machines, mysterious contraptions of gears, belts, wheels, bobbins, spools, and lengths of cotton being turned into thread. Now, he’s seen a single woman working on a spinning wheel before and he’s seen little girl children being made to sit still and use drop spindles; even Margaery had to do so to teach her the patience to work on embroidery later. So the sheer speed and amount of thread being made him dumbstruck with awe. He glanced at his guards and they were also dimly realizing the import of the machines they were witnessing.

The cacophony of clanking and clacking was such that the workers were wearing ear protection; headbands ending with thick cupped cork covered their ears as they walked back and forth changing out empty spindles or full bobbins as they went. He and his guards were given a set each to wear by Alester. They could not talk at all while in the mill. Supervisors were told apart by the little red checkered flags they carried; waving would gain a worker’s attention.

This one mill was dedicated to cotton. Surely another was dedicated to wool. And who knows how many more!

Willas was starting to realize that even if others were to set up their own weaving mills, the sheer dominance of the Florent and Tarly spinning mills were such that Lord Florent would profit by selling the threads used in the first place!

They were turning out canvas for sails, for Royal Navy and Iron Islands Trading Company purchase first and any extra sold on. The end cuts too small for sails were being repurposed; made into simple shoes or sandals with cork soles. Quick, cheap, and more comfortable than the hard wooden clogs traditionally worn by peasants. Willas did vaguely realize that nobody in Bellflower Town went about barefoot, not even the children. And that really was something; children usually grew so quickly that it made no sense to give them shoes at all

when it came to peasants. Or they stuffed the toes of a hand down pair from a grown up in the family with scrap fabric and waddled around until they grew into those shoes.

There was a woolen felting mill, which was in partnership with a number of different milliners in town. Both women and mens' hats were being turned out in Bellflower Town, following the styles shown in that magazine, the Lady Spectator of King's Landing.

If men and women didn't wish to endure the noisy clanking of a mechanical mill they were being employed in other aspects of clothing. There were factories where ready-made clothing were being churned out using patterns; cutters and sewers were needed for petticoats with machine-lace trims. Aprons. Gloves. Shawls. The King's Landing style light neck scarves. Hoods. Cloaks. Waistcoats for both men and women. Plain white shirts or blouses which could be customized by a woman at home with her own embroidery or the new fashion for applique and ribbon trimming.

Mother-of-pearl buttons from the Iron Islands were brought in by the case and they were being sewn on, some sewers specializing only on buttonholes and buttons. Others were dedicated to hemming. Others fitted cuffs and collars. A single garment passed through multiple hands and somehow, this was faster than a single lone worker, no matter how experienced.

And that of course meant that there was a growing cadre of tailors and seamstresses for the discerning merchants and their families who wanted to dress in the style of King's Landing with customized Florent jackets, button front long trousers, and hip-hugging long skirts and dresses, clothes that took greater skill to create and make. These people took the time to travel to Bellflower Town for fittings, to have their measurements taken down into large new paper-paged ledgers in order to buy entire new wardrobes, which could be sent for afterwards. Or the most advanced apprentices proved their worth with masterpieces and struck out on their own, taking what they learned about pattern drafting, draping, and customer service out into the rest of Westeros.

This was all not taking into account the waterwheel powered sawmills making lengths of wood for the town's roof beams, girders, and trusses, floor joists and flooring. There were the furniture making factories, with their waterwheel powered drills, saws, belt sanders, and lathes. The wheelhouse factory. The wheel factory. Which built the wheelhouse he was using as Father felt the need to have all of their wheelhouses replaced with plush, upholstered, glass-windowed, smoother-riding vehicles. Grandmother was in a fine temper over that when she found out!

In all the ways traditional crafts worked on previously by skilled craftsmen of guilds, taking years of scutwork and apprenticing to comprehend, learn, and become skilled at the doing and finishing, the Florents looked for ways it could be broken apart and done more efficiently by assembly line methods. The Florents partnered with forward-thinking masters, gave them loans to hire on architects and builders for a factory or mill, which they were repaid with interest and then leased those buildings to them, and set about inventing the ways to make it happen, filing patents, which then locked these crafts masters or entire guilds into service to the Florents (for TWENTY YEARS) by contracts and licensing fees. Were their products as fine as true masterworks? No. Not yet. But a cheap step stool bought from Florent-owned

factories was worth coin in hand to them instead of a varnished, gilded, scrollwork cabinet from Lannisport bought out of their control. Cheap wooden furniture was popular in Dorne, in fact, given the lack of wood at all in many of their desert holdings!

And Willas nearly forgot the tin canning factory, turning Reach produce into Royal Navy supplies and selling the excess off to the public!

(Lord Alester, as it turned out, dragged the tours out for so long that they hadn't even made it to the factories dedicated to turning out advanced farming equipment made out of steel. So there was also that.)

There were so many, so many different ways of earning coin on Florent lands, just within Bellflower Town. It was precious, precious, and of course Lord Florent was spending to protect it. It did not matter in the end that Willas had seen it with his own two eyes. He was like a child looking at a jack-in-the-box, uncomprehending of the mechanisms inside that made the clown pop out. The Florents had kept everything secret and discreet for so, so very long, caused his Grandmother sleepless nights, and finally showed Bellflower Town to Willas in all its still incomplete glory. And showed that they were so far ahead in the race that there was no point in anybody, not the Tyrells, possibly not even the Lannisters, had business competing against them.

Willas gulped.

“Will you be staying with us for dinner, my lord?” Alester tilted his head with inquiry.

“Yes,” Willas said more firmly than he felt.

Lord Alester bowed and made a gesture at one of his guards. That man made his way to the signal tower. Ah.

Lord Alester and his men rode alongside Willas' wheelhouse. As they arrived, the ongoing construction was unavoidable at Brightwater Keep. It was built upon a large hill, a traditional motte and bailey that was improved over the generations into stone, the square towers at corners of its wall a legacy of practical defensive architecture instead of palatial luxury that saw Highgarden sprawl over its own hilltop in white stone. They were building out a new encircling wall with those sharply pointed bastions, spaced a proper scorpion bolt flight range away from the original curtain wall. Lord Florent had poured money and labor into fortifying Bellflower Town first. Willas thought it backwards. A castle was a lord's seat and pride, after all!

As they crossed the new drawbridge over the new moat (still being excavated deeper) and passed through the new gatehouse, Willas saw that the new walls incorporated new buildings in of themselves. Long narrow blocks that served as barracks surely, armories, storerooms, and other aggressively useful, defensive purpose.

They passed into the courtyard within the original walls, where the wheelhouse stopped and he had to get into his litter chair. Here, it seemed that Lord Alester left the previous improvements of his ancestors well enough alone. Willas had been made to study what the Tyrells knew of Brightwater Keep's layout. Past Florents had saved on labor and cost of stone

by building newer buildings along the perimeter, using the curtainwall as a fourth wall for the buildings as time went on. The big old square stone tower keep in the center of the courtyard had a shorter stone wing added at some point; more modern living quarters and a bigger ballroom and feasting hall as the Florents gained slowly in wealth.

What immediately struck Willas, given the lack of obvious building activity, were that all the upper story windows, the non-defensive ones, had glass paned windows with new storm shutters for their protection. Waiting for him in line of precedence were Lady Melara Florent and an entire (Too many!) troop of fosters. Now, Willas had heard that their fosterings were unusual in that they were allowed to go home to their families for one week out of every two moons. It didn't seem rightly done, he thought, as the girls dipped their curtsies and the boys made their bows as Melara named them in turn.

Willas was carried into the old great hall of Brightwater Keep, where he spied newer oil paintings taking pride of place in place of older tapestries. He took his seat next to Lord Alester's right hand and Lady Melara sat at Lord Alester's left at the high table. The fosters were all at a separate table and doubtless because of his presence nobody else, not knights nor the higher ranked retainers, were present for this dinner. The old grand oak table had not changed, but the seating had; comfortable, easily moved upholstered chairs in the new Lady Selyse style, as it was called in the Lady Spectator, showing off that Florent brocade.

The antique Myrish blown glass goblets had not changed. The porcelain plates, Westerosi-made, were new. They were decorated with cobalt blue flowers and scrollwork patterns with gilded rims. Very fine, indeed.

He felt safe in complimenting the appearance of these new plates, which led into a conversation about the trip said plates had to take by sea all the way from Gulltown, doubling the Dornish cape, and up north to Oldtown, where the most dangerous part (aside from the risk of an entire ship sinking) were the shipping crates getting too violently jostled on the road.

Willas got the feeling that Lord Florent was eager to finish up on improving his wharf, so that any luxury goods he required would arrive more safely, on his own properly leveled and tightly paved roads.

Willas looked around some more in the old hall, noticing that the vaulted beams with the fox head corbels of the ceiling were all freshly painted and that the whole place was given a fresh white lime wash, to better show off the oil paintings. It was then that he noticed that the very wide and tall old fireplace had something new built inside it. It seemed like a square column covered in blue ceramic tile, extending all the way up into the flue. There was an opening in the middle, much smaller than he would have expected to heat a hall of the size he was sitting in.

He inquired about it and instantly regretted it, as Lord Alester effusively launched into a speech explaining the design and usefulness of the masonry heater. Something about the fire's heat being most efficiently stored within the bricks that made up the thing as hot air traveled a labyrinth of passages to be released over time, requiring much less fuel wood at all to be used. Willas sighed to himself; he knew some lords worried about the cost of candles,

but it was really boring and faintly ridiculous that Lord Florent, as rich as he was, with those rings on his fingers, was banging on about the advantages of reducing the use of firewood!

“I’ve had them made for all the fireplaces, you see,” Alester continued, blatantly ignoring the bored face that Willas was attempting to hide. “Snug and cozy, just the sort of thing for good living! And so much less soot in the air and on the walls and well, everything! Simply wonderful, you know. It was my nephew Erren’s idea; he’s going to file a patent!”

Willas suppressed a yawn.

“Oh?”

“Yes,” Melara nodded eagerly and Willas groaned inwardly. “Dragonstone Island has had to be conservative with their forests. Necessity made him solve the problem. Can you imagine, having to pay for imported firewood!”

“No, I can’t, actually,” Willas shrugged.

“It’s just the sort of thing we’re lucky to not have to manage at all, living in the Reach,” Melara tittered.

“I suppose,” Willas tried for levity. “Ser Erren will open up a stove-making factory?”

The idea of shipping entire brick-made and tile-clad stoves around was funny.

“Oh, no,” Alester’s voice turned into that smug purr that caused Grandmother Olenna’s hackles to rise. “He’ll obviously have trained and licensed stove-makers and open up business and have them go out building out heaters by commission in the North, even the Vale and the Iron Islands, of course. Like Tyrion Lannister with his flushing jakes!”

Ugh. What grasping mercantile talk is this?

“I see,” Willas took a sip of wine. “I congratulate Ser Erren on his ideas.”

“I’ll let him know, next I write,” Melara dimpled at him.

“Speaking of flushing jakes-” Alester’s teeth flashed in a grin.

Torture. Except with delicious food. Lord Florent was cruel indeed.

“We’ve had some installed! It is very well, especially with a new cistern I’ve had built on the roof, for the flush. Would you like to see one?”

Seven Hells. Why?

Willas demurred, despite Alester assuring him that the flushing action was something to see. The quality of the food and Melara’s less technical and therefore charming conversation was such that it was impossible to leave before sunset. He was forced to have a raven sent to Highgarden, stating that he would be partaking of Florent hospitality.

At the end of dinner, everybody withdrew to a large parlor, where luckily Lord Alester was enough of a good host to leave him be and the fosters approached him, as was polite and Willas took the time to address them and inquire about their stay. They liked Brightwater Keep. The boys liked their training, though they did not enjoy being made to run laps, push ups, burpees (what is that?) and other physical conditioning exercises, but that was to be expected. They gossiped as boys did about the strongest knights at Brightwater Keep and which ones might be worth squiring for and perhaps there were better knights from their own homes that their fathers would find for them to squire for, and attending future tourneys and how exciting it all was.

It was a duty to address all who met with him, so he cautiously spoke to the girls. A fair few blushed and went tongue-tied, which flattered him, but he knew not to get any ideas. Grandmother made sure of that! They liked singing and dancing, a fair few liked riding out for hammerball and even played soccer. He was a little baffled at that, until a very quiet girl, Tysha Oldflowers, pointed out that no less than Queen Cersei enjoyed hammerball. With an endorsement such as that, girls wanting to be fashionable for a potential invite to the Foxhole as guest for royal court events had no choice but to have riding habits made and to work on their hammer swinging skills and horsemanship.

Won't Margaery be annoyed by that, Willas thought to himself. She didn't much like going faster than a trot on a palfrey.

Willas wistfully agreed that hammerball seemed quite the fun new thing to do.

He did miss riding.

They asked him if he'd been to King's Landing. Willas had to truthfully say that he had never left the Reach. Though, he did exchange letters with Prince Oberyn Martell. He was then asked about any mention of King's Landing from Prince Oberyn's letters. It seemed harmless and Willas was not so blind to his own faults like his father that he couldn't admit that he wanted to gain approbation with some light boasting. And if that meant spreading some gossip from letters, why not?

Tysha Lannister sat in the periphery. She noted how Lord Alester and Lady Melara were almost too obviously giving Willas Tyrell space amongst the fosters, to have a crowd of young people decidedly not his equals, nor future equals in rank to lull him into lowering his guard with small talk, so that she could work on making her own conclusions about him and possibly learn something about Prince Oberyn Martell. She carefully dash-dotted notes while hiding her notebook with the excess fabric of her embroidery hoop. Embroidery hoops were enormously useful as a misdirection prop.

"So is your father planning on holding any tourneys in Highgarden soon?" Tysha ventured during a pause in the conversation. "I've heard so much about Highgarden tourneys, they must be so wonderful!"

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