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I also want to thank everyone for their support and encouragement.

27th Day of the 3rd Moon, 299 AC

The Lord of Winterfell, Near Pentos

It's been nearly over six moons since he left King's Landing. Nearly a year since he had seen his wife. How was Cat faring?

Did she give birth yet?

Did she miss him?

How was Robb dealing with Winterfell and the North?

Did his family think he was dead at sea?

'It wouldn't matter soon enough.'

Eddard Stark ignored the whisper in his mind. Yet it was not wrong; soon enough, he would sail home. Besides, fretting over things he had no control over was useless, so he focused on the road ahead. Essos was not a place to be underestimated, and House Stark had no allies or friends here.

It made him feel wary and vulnerable.

Twenty leagues ago, signs of civilisation began to emerge. The once savage lands covered by bushes, weeds, and forests melted to give way to the roads that helped them travel faster. With them came green rolling hills and orchards, small farms and villages that slowly grew into large estates, enormous pastures teeming with cattle, and fields of golden wheat stretching as far as the eye could see. A city like Pentos, supposedly more populous than King's Landing, would require an immense amount of food daily.

Of course, the Northern force had paid for their supplies, for there was no need to look for trouble where none existed. Ned had plenty of coins in his travel chest, even before Euron Greyjoy had graciously tripled it.

"Why do most of the smallfolk look so... dull and downtrodden?" Tommen nodded at the poorly dressed peasants who dragged their feet around a smaller field of corn, looking disinterested in everything. Not even the presence of Dothraki or Winter scared them.

"Slavery," Rogar Wull, the chieftain's son riding with Ned today, grunted sourly.

Tommen scrunched up his face, making him look almost adorable. Almost.

"But I thought Pentos no longer kept slaves?"

"They are not slaves in name, if only half a step better," Ned explained icily. "'Free bond servants', the Pentoshi call them. Yet magisters control most of the estate and land, and to simply live here, you must pay more than you could ever earn; thus, they have no choice but to work for the magisters until they die. Still, at least indentured servants cannot be sold like cattle, so there is that mild difference."

Taking a deep breath, he continued, "It's a sham, however, a poisoned scheme, for they can't own anything that could be used to pay their debts. The clothes on their back, the boots on their feet, the tools they use—all *lent* or sold at exorbitant sums by their masters, only increasing the debt. So, most of them work just enough not to be punished."

"Aye," Rogar nodded. "And if they get some coin, they won't bother saving it up to pay off their debts or freedom. No, they use it to drown themselves in wine or whores to forget their misery for a night."

"Look at him," the Lord of Winterfell pointed at a man herding a flock of sheep on a grassy hill to their left. "He has an iron collar on his neck, and his shoulder is branded with a shepherd's crook as they do to their slaves in Myr, Lys, and Tyrosh. Pah, free by law, they would claim. What a farce."

Tommen frowned, face turning fierce.

"I don't like this," he muttered angrily.

"I like it as much as you do," Ned sighed, patting his page's shoulder. "But you will oft be faced with things you dislike and are powerless to change. Our goal is to return home, not make an enemy out of an entire city."

'You could always loot the lands and sack the city,' the hoary voice whispered in his mind. It was Theon, his hungry ancestor. *'These are all soft people, unused to war, and those Braavosi have even forbidden them to hire swords if what you say is true. With a thousand men, you can grab that city.'*

The Lord of Winterfell ignored the voice in his head. It made Theon Stark speak less, and Ned had yet to forgive him for insulting his wife. There had been no apology either, and Eddard Stark had not forgotten. His ancestors' advice was too similar—smashing through each obstacle and not trusting outsiders. It was a foolish way to gain more and more foes, and it was little wonder the Hungry Wolf spent his whole life fighting.

Yet, Tommen kept looking around, his green eyes dimming darker as he inspected the brands and collars.

"But... isn't slavery considered a sin by both the old and the new gods?"

"It is. But different gods rule these lands."

It was good that the prince had a soft spot in his heart. After moons with the Northmen, he had shed his shell of shyness, allowing the young prince to thrive and spread his wings. Yet Tommen had shown himself quite headstrong and stubborn. There was a pride in him that reminded Ned of Robert and the Queen. It was not necessarily bad, for a prince had to be proud, so long as he had the wits and skill to back it up. Ned would do his best to nurture those skills and temper his pride lest it go out of control.

Gods, he missed his wife and children. He longed for the pleasant chill of the North and the white veil of snow that would cover the land. The chafing heat of the South and Essos had made him irritable, and all those irksome, buzzing flies and other insects that got almost everywhere but were absent in the North did not help his mood either.

Some days, Ned idly wondered how the realm would fare in his absence.

Things would be fine, for Tywin would be a capable, if ruthless, Hand of the King. Robert might dislike the old lion, but none could deny his competence. Ned also had no love for the Lord of Casterly Rock, but even he would begrudgingly admit the man's capabilities.

This assurance was one of the reasons Ned was not in a great rush to return to the North. True enough, he wanted to see his wife, but excess haste would leave them vulnerable to adversaries. This land was foreign and unsettling, and he did not trust the Essosi one whit; on this, Ned agreed with his bloodthirsty ancestor. So, even in these seemingly peaceful lands, scouts were being sent out to screen the road for ambushes or other foes. Everyone was armed and at least lightly armoured, just in case.

Yes, the Pentoshi were supposed to be banned from having any sort of military aside from a very limited city guard, but that did not mean much. If they mocked the laws against slavery, what was to stop them from stepping over the Braavosi ban?

So Ned and his men rode undisturbed until Pentos slowly appeared in sight, and the dirt road was now lined with crushed gravel. Tall walls surrounded a bustling city at the shore of the enormous circular eponymous bay. The only other thing of note that could be seen from the outside was the enormous brick towers that seemed like reddish spears poking at the sky.

Surprisingly, the stench was far lesser than that of King's Landing.

The scouts returned, warning them that the gates were closed and the walls were manned with pikemen and crossbows. Soon enough, a force of two scores of riders garbed in ringmail rode down the road, escorting a plump, silver-haired man clad in red silks.

"Tommen, go behind with the Liddles." The prince hastily obeyed the stern order, spurring his Dothraki steed. It would do no good to show the young prince. Not while they were vulnerable and out in the open.

The Northmen stopped by his command, and the most veteran Stark guardsmen assembled behind him, with Jory and Red Walder at his sides, while the Wull heir remained, ready to draw his dragonsteel greatsword. The Lord of Winterfell wore that wondrous scale armour looted from Euron Greyjoy that fit perfectly over his arming doublet. It was a marvel of the Freehold: flexible, light, comfortable, warm, and hidden in plain sight as he wore a padded white surcoat with his coat of arms embroidered on the chest. Ned could feel Winter stalking behind a handful of trees by the road, ready to leap into an ambush.

'Peh, so much for a city watch. Steel greaves, arming doublets, cuirasses, kettle helmets with coifs, some well-forged swords and war lances. And those are all well-bred warhorses, not some draft beasts. It seems that whatever agreement those fat magisters signed with the Braavosi isn't worth the parchment it was inked on.'

If there was anything Theon Stark knew well, it was matters of warfare and fighting. He seemed to know what Ned knew somehow but rarely cared for it. Nothing went past the Hungry Wolf's gaze, not even the slightest side arm, posture, or other small things Ned would have overlooked two or three years prior.

Now, though, his senses were sharper, honed by the brutal whetstone of countless battles. Even his connection to Winter, which now felt like an additional limb that had always been there, only sharpened it further. It was not all good, though. Ned remembered nine times he perished in battle, and it was a harrowing feeling that left him reeling for nearly a sennight after he woke. The feeling of blood, too much blood on his hands, never went away either, no matter how much he washed them.

The Pentoshi retinue finally arrived, a white parlay flag fluttering atop a long spear. The silk-clad man slowly approached at the head, his blue eyes warily drifting above where the direwolf banner fluttered proudly.

"Greetings," he spoke in the common tongue with the slightest accent. "I am Nysaro Narratis, my friend. What brings House Stark to Pentos in such numbers?"

"I am Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell. My men and I require safe passage back home," Ned inclined his head slightly. "Ships, crews, lodging—everything shall be paid for out of our purses."

Nysaro shook his head, looking quite regretful.

"I'm afraid the city of Pentos cannot grant such a request."

'Seize the city, boy,' Theon whispered. 'You know you can. Sack it clean. Take their riches, their craftsmen, and their women. At least they had the wits to bring a parlay flag. Otherwise, you could have killed the fat fool and his men.'

Ned ignored him, even though his hand sought the comfort of the cold hilt of his blade. "May I inquire why?"

"Why, you ask?" The Pentoshi chortled, waving his arm behind him. "Pentos is forbidden from consorting with armed groups such as yours, sunset lord. All of your men look hard and eager for blood. The council of Magisters has seen fit to deny you entry into our city. Besides, you somehow have hundreds of Dothraki under your banners. Can you even control them?"

"I can." Nearly a score of the horselords had been beheaded for impugning his good name and not following orders—looting and raping without permission when they arrived in the city's hinterlands. Naturally, it kept the rest in line. "On my honour, I give my word that there shall be no trouble from me and mine in the city. You will see us all gone by the next dawn."

"Word? Words are wind, my friend, and the answer is still no. Alas, the magisters simply cannot afford those shenanigans you Westerosi started pulling lately."

The Northmen behind him all felt uneasy, restless, ready to draw steel and fight.

Eddard Stark had to swallow his disgruntlement and the angry tug at the corner of his mind. "There is something you are not telling. A different reason."

Winter could smell it, and so could he.

"Ah, how canny of you," Nysaro's words thickened with begrudging respect. "It is not untrue, I must admit. These are troublesome times, my lord of Stark. You, Westerosi, are considered a bad omen as of late. Too many of the Free Cities were met with fighting, revolts, or even other matters that bode ill for trade and peace. It is nothing personal, my friend. I wish you good fortune on your journey, preferably far away from here."

Words said, the Pentoshi nodded one last time, wheeled his uneasy steed, and rode back to his city along with the escort.

'He speaks of war. I can feel it in my soul, boy.'

Eddard Stark did not like the sound of that at all. But his blood sang with something primal, something he now recognised easily. May the gods forgive him; he wanted to fight, even though he hated the bloodshed and slaughter.

"What do we do now, My Lord?" Rogar asked glumly. "How are we to return home?"

The rest of the Northmen looked just as indignant. Everyone had expected that they would be sailing back home tonight or tomorrow, even. They longed to meet their wives, children, siblings, and parents, and Ned was no different. Alas, fate had other plans.

Howland came down from a tree atop the tallest hill; the Myrish far-eye looted from Greyjoy in his grasp. "I counted at least a thousand men on the walls alone and four times as many gatherings on the city's squares. The shine of their arms and armour was unmistakable - those aren't simple city guards."

'Easy to crush on the open field with your horse,' Theon muttered as always. *'Probably unbloodied, but they have no balls to sally away from their walls. Damn, if you had engineers or sappers...'*

"No armed forces, my arse. No matter, there are other ports than Pentos," Ned sighed, pushing down the tangled feelings in his breast. "We continue southward."

Another moon or two of delay wouldn't matter much, would it? Doubtlessly Robert was still drinking and whoring, while Tywin was keeping the realm together. Robb had his mother to hold the North, and Benjen held the Wall. His only real worry was for Jon, but even if he was in Winterfell right now, there was nothing Ned could do for him aside from venturing beyond the Wall.

He could have made trouble for Pentos. Become a nuisance, freeing 'free' bond servants, sacking farms, and slowly starving the city. But Braavos backed them, and the Braavosi could be troublesome foes with their large fleet so close to the North. Besides, such tactics would waste more time than travelling further south to the next port.

The Wull heir glared at the walls, a heavy frown on his bearded face.

"But what if they do not let us in like the Pentoshi?"

"Pray, for their sake, that they do."

Let things be peaceful. Let their journey be smooth. Eddard Stark would loathe to find out the lengths he would be willing to go to return home if his way was barred again.

1st Day of the 4th Moon

The Young Wolf

After all the fighting, Ice felt more comfortable on his back. Dozens had died to the wicked dragonsteel greatsword at the Ruby Ford. While not easy to wield on horseback, with the momentum and weight of the horse beneath his hips, Ice's oversharpe edge cleaved through steel and bone with little effort. Even a knight in full suit of plate had been cut in twain. It was a long, cumbersome sword, even if it was lighter than a normal greatsword, yet it was very effective on foot. Robb still had a one-handed war axe on his hip and his trusty lance while on horseback.

The Northmen were greeted like heroes everywhere they passed. Cheers, flowers, and even supplies were being offered to his men. Each day on the march, scores, sometimes even hundreds, of volunteers flocked to his banners, eager to kill more Reachmen and protect their lands. The promise of loot was also a big factor, for his men did not shy away from showcasing what they captured.

Seven bloody hells, four young maidens had even tried to sneak into his tent at night *simultaneously*, and Robb had to throw them out and triple his guard until they gave up. Grey Wind seemed more amused

than anything else at the conundrum, and Robb suspected the wolf purposely let the maidens through, but the young lord would remain staunchly faithful to his wife.

Even the Greatjon approved with a few words of wisdom, "*A happy wife leads to a happy life.*"

His uncle's retinue rode out to meet them a few miles from Lychester. Of course, the rumoured wayward Freys that supposedly joined were absent.

"Nephew," Edmure's eyes lit up as they met in a field. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

Yet the Tully heir did not look like Robb remembered. His face had grown gaunt and possessed a stiff harshness; his usual cheer was nowhere to be seen, and his posture was rigid and choppy. Even his well-trimmed beard was sheared clean, showing an angry, clenched jaw underneath, with a wicked scar on his left cheek.

His bosom friends were behind him, but in lesser numbers, looking far grimmer than Robb remembered. Judging by his coat of arms, there was an additional older knight, the Blackfish, but Robb couldn't see Hugo or Ronard Vance, and Lymon Goodbrook was also absent. They could have been with the army, yet the shroud of sorrow and anger over his uncle said otherwise.

"I'm glad you're well, uncle," the young Stark smiled. "Perhaps it would be best to talk further in private."

Half an hour later, they were in a sprawling pavilion looted from Rowan's camp. It was far from the only thing looted, of course. Robb owned nearly two hundred thousand dragons more, cattle, supplies, thousands of sets of plate armour, brigandines, barding, and hauberks—all looted from the slain and captured Reachmen. It was not an honourable thing to do, but the Reach had shown themselves as curs unworthy of such courtesies. It also saw Robb's men better equipped, which would save many lives in the coming battles.

Even the Valyrian Steel blades were not spared. The Greatjon had taken a greatsword from the corpse of a Rodden knight, and two more dragonsteel blades found their way into the hands of Lord Matrim Wells and Lord Halys Hornwood.

Robb had often heard the Reach was abundant, not only in food and coin. Yet, seeing it was an entirely different matter. Over a third of the two hundred twenty-seven Valyrian Steel blades in Westeros lay in the Reach, according to Maester Thurgood's *Inventories*.

Grey Wind obediently joined him, curiously inspecting the wary Blackfish, whose craggy face was full of caution as he eyed the direwolf.

"Was it wise to bring such a beast on the campaign?" Edmure asked. "Gods, he's the size of a bloody warhorse now."

"Wise? Maybe not," Robb ran a hand through his companion's grey fur. "He makes for an obvious target, yet he killed a knight, three men-at-arms, and almost routed the Reach cavalry with his mere presence. The horses don't like direwolves, and while the northern horse has grown used to Grey Wind's presence, the Reachmen were not - and that is before he started howling."

"So he has tasted human flesh," Brynden Tully sternly pointed out. "What's to say he wouldn't partake again?" It amused Robb that their problem was not the sixteen thousand Reachmen butchered. Nor their heads lined along the Trident. No, that casual show of butchery that made his insides twist and still gave him nightmares was accepted without question.

Yet a direwolf in the battle? Now, that merited questioning as if none had previously used war dogs on campaigns. They might be his kin, but Robb was irked by their lack of trust in his companion.

"He will. In the many battles that await us and under my orders. Grey Wind, sit." The direwolf obediently sat by his side with his tongue lazily lolled out, his big eyes looking at him for more orders, and the Blackfish nodded in acceptance. "How is my grandfather? I have neither seen nor heard of his presence."

Edmure's face grew solemn while the old knight just rubbed his face, looking tired.

"Alas, Hoster was ailing on his deathbed," his voice thickened with grief. "His wits had left him, but the word of the cruel defeat at Rushing Falls was too much, and he died five days later."

"Damn those Reachmen," Robb swore. "They broke all rules of warfare and decency to prop up some jumped-up uncle... out of what? Greed? No matter."

The damned Reachmen had not even offered the captured lords and knights the chance to take the Black for life in any of the battles they had won so far. So Robb had returned the courtesy in full; he wouldn't want such honourless curs forced upon his burdened uncle.

"They have gotten too drunk on their glory and success," Edmure balled his fist. "What now, nephew?"

"Now, I give you the hostages I have captured," Robb said. "I have more than enough spoils, and dragging those fools through the campaign would be ill-suited." All the lords following in his wake were already heavy with plunder and gold after looting the Frey lands and a single battle. They were more than willing to let the Reachmen be handed over to the Riverlords as a sign of good faith and confirming their previous alliance.

His uncle leaned in closer, blue eyes hardening. "Oh, who did you manage to capture?"

"Sers Reynard and Triston Rowan, Lord Wilbert Footly, Ser Egbert Footly, Lord Ronel Cordwayner, his son, Ser Renald Cordwayner, Sers Harrold and Perryn Osgrey," the Blackfish's face began twitching, and Edmure was almost gaping like a fish, but Robb continued with amusement, "Lord Myles Cobb and his sons, Rodden, Deddings, Perry--"

"I want those traitors," Edmure grunted. "Gods, Tytos would love it if he could get his hands on the Footlys who burned his heir."

"They're all yours, uncle," the young Stark smiled. "There's a few more, but not worth mentioning."

The Blackfish looked quite impressed.

"You've captured quite a lot," the old knight murmured. "We can perhaps free some of the Lords, heirs, and knights the damn Reachmen captured at the Rushing Falls." At least plenty of tarred heads were sent to King's Landing as a gift to his royal good brother.

"Well, it would have been twice as many if some fools refused to surrender to *heathens* and *heretics*," Robb shrugged, yet his anger rose. "Though, it's not all good news. Theon Greyjoy, my father's hostage, defected to the damn fleeing Reachmen after the battle."

Gods, Captain Derek's words had infuriated him so much. Why would Theon force his men to blindly chase in the dark and then surrender at the first chance? The evidence of his guilt was incontrovertible. All the trust, all that friendship, the chance for Theon to prove himself capable and rack up some achievements was pissed away.

The betrayal stung; it stung so badly. If Theon had fled for his kinsmen, it would have hurt less, but no, it was those damned prancing flower men. What sort of imbecile surrendered to the losing side? Did Robb ever know the Greyjoy heir? Had it all been just some sort of well-crafted facade?

Yet the harshness of their situation sank in quickly; the Blackfish managed to look even grimmer, and Edmure swore.

"Damn. Those flowery Reachmen would surely try to leverage his presence there for one alliance or other."

"Aye," Robb's face darkened. "My father told me Balon Greyjoy is not a man that could be trusted or reasoned with. Regardless, the reavers were always going to be a nuisance sooner or later. It would do us good to prepare. I have already sent a raven for Winterfell to bolster the defences on my western coast. I suggest you do the same."

"I'll speak to Patrek and his father. Still, the Mallister warships could hardly repel the Iron Fleet alone, and I don't know whether Lord Lannister has fully rebuilt his Lannisport fleet. With those damned Tyroshi burning the Royal Fleet, the Redwyne fleet could potentially work with the Ironborn to put more pressure on our coasts." Edmure pulled over a map and sprawled it over on the rough table. "What shall be our next course of action? Siege Harrenhal? Join Lord Tywin? Rush south for the Gold Road to give Renly and his Reachmen a proper buggering from behind?"

"Too predictable," Robb cracked his knuckles. "Rowan ought to have at least three thousand men in Harrenhal, and such a castle would not fall by storm without paying a bitter price. Renly's men are not fools, no matter how much we wish them to be. They will prepare for all of those options. Besides, Lord Lannister is too stiff and too passive in his command. Instead of rushing for King's Landing, he should have struck Lord Rowan hard and fast and linked up with your forces."

The Blackfish snorted, "The Seven help me; you'd be the only one calling Tywin Lannister a passive man, grandnephew."

"Tywin Lannister is not someone I would want to be commanded by. And well, if I were Renly or his commanders, I would force a crossing at the Rush. Split my forces into four, five, or six groups of over ten thousand men and push, but Lord Lannister lacks the swords to plug all gaps. It would be bloody, but Tywin would be forced to retreat to the city, where he could be sieged and have hundreds of thousands of mouths to feed."

"You have a plan," Edmure rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Well, let's hear it. You certainly have more victories under your belt than everyone else fighting for King Joffrey."

The acknowledgement warmed Robb's heart. Seeing that he would no longer be dismissed as some green boy was a relief. While being underestimated was useful, it still made his insides twist uncomfortably as he had to swallow the insults. However, he would have to contend with something possibly even more daunting.

Being put on a pedestal and expected to make miracles.

"First, you shall take all my sellswords and all those Rivermen that deigned to pick up their arms and join the fight."

Robb had taken a liking to his way of travel. Lightning quick and taking his foes by surprise - he did not need the newly joined pikemen of Darry, Wayn, Vypren, or the rest to slow him down.

"I suggest either marching south to the gold road or slowly starving that rat Rowan out of the castle he's taking." He tapped on Harrenhal. "Unless they lost all their wits, the Reachmen would expect us either way. Yet even with a few thousand men, Rowan could be a dagger pointed at our backs."

"And you?"

Robb Stark smiled.

3rd Day of the 4th Moon, 299 AC

The Iron Captain, Pyke

"You called for me, brother?" Victarion bowed.

The Lord Reaper of Pyke was still gaunt and thin, yet bitterness and age had only hardened him. The Iron Captain knew his lordly brother had not grown weaker for it. His sword hand was stronger than before, his blood tempered, and his mind sharper, especially after that accident a few years prior.

"Yes." his brother's voice was even, completely unreadable. The meeting was in Balon's private audience chamber, which meant he did not want anyone else to know what they spoke of.

But Victarion had never been one for thinking and plotting; that was for the lords, for Balon. But fighting? Few could rival him; none was the Iron Captain's equal at sea, bar Stannis Baratheon—a brave, hard man and better sailor than most. Almost Ironborn. Victarion had sent an empty driftwood raft soaked in oils and kindlings with a suit of armour and set it aflame to send the great man who had given Victarion such a fierce yet deserved defeat.

"Why the funeral without a body?" Nute the Barber, his right-hand man, had asked.

"It's for the sailing stag. If those damned Seven don't take him in, may he be welcomed in the Drowned God's halls." Dying in a bed, ailing from some sickness—the worst way to go for a worthy warrior.

Alas, they could no longer meet in battle to test each other's mettle, and the Iron Captain would not have a chance to salvage his defeat. Not in this life. Perhaps they would meet in the Drowned God's watery halls for a proper rematch.

Victarion shook his head, banishing the memory as he drained a cup of Arbour Gold.

"Are we finally going to join the war?"

"Not yet," Balon's fists tightened. "I have received an interesting proposal from the Flower King."

"Peh," Victarion spat. Renly Baratheon's flowery ways garnered little respect in the Iron Isles. What sort of cunt usurped his nephew? "What would a soft Greenlander like him even be able to offer? Was that what those ships I saw in Lordsport were about?"

"I know not what Renly Baratheon wants, but he offered tribute and gifts." His brother leaned forward, face turning sly. "You are drinking some of that tribute. They claim they have Theon and request an audience. Those Greenlanders have enough sense not to make any demands of me."

"Peh, what would you even speak of? As if Greenlanders could ever be trusted. All flowery promises, nothing more than false words. Words are wind, as they say, and the only good wind is the one that blows in the Iron Fleet's sails."

"I am aware," Balon ran a hand through his greying mane, yet his lips curved into a savage smile. "The old lion wants our aid too. He's almost begging for our assistance. Can you imagine that? The proud Lord of Lannister cornered enough to bow his head and offer terms that would make even a Codd blush."

"Bah, fuck those Greenlanders, I say. We follow the Old Way—take what we want and pay the iron price for it."

His brother nodded eagerly.

"Aye, I do not need any permission from some fools far away to reave and raid."

Victarion slammed a fist over his chest. "Say the word, brother. I will sail the Iron Fleet down the Sunset coast and smash all their ships. Loot their towns, villages, and harbours, take their women, children, and men. Sack their septs for all the gold they leave there for us to take."

Victarion was not smart, but the Greenlanders had lost their wits. Unlike the Drowned Priests, who shunned worldly wealth, the Seven Gods and their mewling clergymen were greedy. Almost all Septs were covered with gold and silver, ill-defended and ripe for the taking. They believed some statues would stop an Ironborn from taking what he could. Madness!

"Not just yet," Balon's face twisted into a grimace. "The Demon of the Trident is dead, and so is his seafaring brother by blood and his wolfish brother by choice. Their death must be a sign from the Drowned God. Yet that defeat taught me something I would never forget. Eight years it took us to rebuild our strength and our ships. Each vessel lost was a heavy blow. The Greenlanders think themselves cunning, dangling my son before me like a bait for a hungry fish. I will hear them out, just this once."

"We should not stay far from the sea," Victarion cautioned. Far from shore, the Drowned God no longer protected them, and if an Ironman died away from the sea, he would never enter his halls.

Balon knew this and nodded. Of course, his brother was always the cunning and smart one.

"I do not trust them," he grunted. "But at least they have the sense to send me a proper tribute and propose the meeting on the docks of Greyshield. Aeron claims to have foreseen great glory and bloodshed for the Drowned God should we take this opportunity. The Great Kraken is already preparing for a small voyage. I want you to join me."

The Iron Captain kneeled. "It will be an honour, brother."

5th Day of the 4th Mon, 299 AC

Myrcella, Winterfell

News of Robb's victory was more than welcomed—and Myrcella organised a small feast to celebrate. Her fears melted away. All the naysayers and nights filled with doubt and brooding over the war that Myrcella could not affect would no longer plague her.

Yet the end of the message arrived with an order like a dark cloud over the silver lining of her husband's victory.

And now, Myrcella was going to the birthing rooms, where the babes and Lady Catelyn still resided. Maester Luwin had advised against moving them to their prepared quarters, preferring to keep them

near at hand in case his aid was needed. Myrcella still felt winded after a short flight of stairs; even her legs felt swollen, if less so.

She had believed that the pains would be gone after birthing Edwyn. Oh, how wrong she had been.

"It takes nearly two moons for your body to recover with proper food and plenty of bedrest," Maester Luwin had explained when everything still hurt after a sennight, and she struggled to walk for more than ten minutes.

Robb would have loved her teats, which were swollen and heavy with milk that her son enjoyed. Edwyn turned out to be a voracious baby, with lusty cries that could wake half the castle. A hale and hearty son, just as she had promised her husband. With his striking silver-grey eyes that could still change and his mop of golden hair, Myrcella did not doubt that he would not only be a great warrior but a charmer.

Still, she was recovering very well.

Alas, Lady Catelyn had not been as lucky. All the babes were healthy despite Luwin constantly fretting over them. Yet carrying two babes was heavier than one, the dowager was no longer young and spry, and the birth had taken a toll on her. Even now, she was abed and would not leave the newborns out of her sight.

"What are you three doing here?" She asked breathlessly as Arya, Sansa, and Rickon crowded the hallway again with their shaggy companions. Nymeria, Lady, and Shaggydog wanted to see the babes, but Luwin had yet to allow it.

"We're here to see the babes," Sansa cooed dreamily. "They're so cute."

"Uh, uh, speak for yourself," Arya snorted. "I'm here to see Mother. At least Edwyn, Artos, and Lyarra are no longer all wrinkly and red like gremlins. Artos almost looks like me!"

"Arya, language," her sister chided. "Besides, hair could darken once our siblings grow up. Eyes too, for half a year, according to Luwin."

Rickon, however, looked disgruntled.

"They're too small to play with, and all they do is cry," he whined.

"You were much the same," Myrcella chuckled, ruffling his hair.

"Was not," the denial came in an instant. "I was born big and strong."

Sansa grabbed her brother and pulled his cheeks despite the flailing arms.

"That's a lie, brother. I still remember you as small and adorable, and you couldn't even crawl for moons."

"Lemme go!" Rickon finally detached himself from his eldest sister's grip and angrily rubbed his cheeks. "'Sides, I came here to tell Mother I had a dream."

Myrcella stiffened but swallowed the wariness deep down. At first, she had thought the young boy's dreams were just that—dreams. But after too many of them had proven uncannily accurate in time... in fact, she could not remember a single wrong dream, aside from the more childish ones. The line was thin.

Rickon Stark had dreamed of his bastard brother fighting icemen in the cold lands. Which Myrcella knew had happened. Dreams of his dead brother, stuck in a throne of pale roots, looking like a corpse. Dreams of his Uncle Benjen, dreams of his father, and even dreams of Robb trimming a golden tree were all centred around family, but rarely did any of them bode well.

"Oh, and what is it this time?" Myrcella tried to ask calmly, yet the crack in her voice betrayed her trepidation.

"I told Father to wake up, and he did." Rickon nodded, looking very proud of himself. "He's now fighting with the horsemen."

"Rickon, you know dead men do not wake," Sansa chided mournfully, wiping her budding tears with a handkerchief, but her eyes reddened as if she was about to weep.

Yet the young boy was nothing but stubborn.

"But Father isn't dead; he only fought beside the stone men, woke up, and now fought with horsemen. Ugh." He adorably rubbed his face, looking as confused as the rest.

Arya patted his shoulder with a surprising amount of patience.

"These are just dreams," she nodded wisely. "I also dream of soaring through the skies some nights. Doesn't mean much."

"But I told you Robb will win. I even dreamed of it later," Rickon ducked away from her hand and bared his teeth like a wolf. "Jon and Uncle Benjen have been slaughtering the Icemen for a while, too!"

"But Jon is lost—"

"Enough squabbling," Myrcella interrupted. At moments like these, it was too hard to tell with Rickon if his dreams meant anything or if it was just nightmares and childish stubbornness. "If you have enough energy to sit here and raise a ruckus, you can go for another round of training with Ser Rodrik. Off you trot now."

After a few weak protests, the Stark siblings finally fled, and Myrcella entered the nursery.

The three babes were asleep, wrapped in the softest Torrentine cotton gold could buy.

"Myrcella," Catelyn Stark quietly greeted from the bed. "You seem troubled." She was in a thick sleeping robe, sitting upright with her back to a small hill of pillows while working with a needle on a small tunic. The birth had taken plenty of the dowager, the loss of her husband even more so, but the former Lady of Winterfell had only emerged stronger for it. Harsher. The only warmth she showed was for the babes, and even Sansa, Rickon, and Arya were commanded with an iron hand and severe strictness.

"Because I am," Myrcella muttered quietly, not to wake the babes, and took out the scroll that had arrived from the Riverlands. "Robb won a great victory at the Banks of the Trident."

For a short moment, Catelyn Stark's face softened ever so slightly. But after a heartbeat, it was gone, as if it was never there. "Good. Yet a victory would not trouble you so."

On days like these, Myrcella felt naked under those heavy, piercing blue eyes. Her good mother was too cunning, too observant, completely unlike Cersei.

"Indeed," she muttered sourly. "Robb writes Theon Greyjoy has defected to the Reachmen when chasing the routed foes. Yet... you do not look surprised."

“Balon Greyjoy’s boy was just a hostage with no allegiances to House Stark,” Catelyn scoffed. “My son lied to himself about their supposed friendship. Maybe with time... maybe. We argued about this, you know? I told him Theon must remain here, tucked away in Winterfell, as a hostage against his father. Yet Robb insisted that he keep the Kraken’s son close.”

“What’s done is done. Now, the Lord of Winterfell has ordered the garrison boosted further, and the Houses along the western shores prepared for an attack by sea.”

And it was good that Myrcella had drawn the master arbalist and had him start his work with Ser Cassel. Of course, poaching Joffrey’s favourite had been amusing, but she thought crossbowmen would make Winterfell far more defensible in the very unlikely event of a siege. A man, or even a woman, could easily use a crossbow after a few hours of training.

Bows? That required years of dedication and far more effort that could be spent on better things. It did not help that Robb had taken most of the hunters and woodsmen of Winterfell - those who make the best archers, with him south.

Catelyn Stark’s stern face grew even more grave.

“Good,” she muttered. “See it done, then. You hardly need my permission to run this castle anymore.” Such was the fate of widows, and Myrcella had turned six and ten and was considered a woman grown at the turn of the first moon.

While that was true, Catelyn Stark commanded too much respect from the household and the Northmen. After nearly two decades, she had sunk her roots deep into the place. But it was odd to see such a spendthrift woman not even blink at the additional spending. Sword and armour had to be forged, steel and iron had to be bought, arrows and bolts had to be fletched, and new men had to be hired and trained, all of which cost plenty of gold.

“Even so, I must rely on your experience in such matters.” Even now that she was just a dowager, Myrcella felt obliged to consult her good mother to keep a harmonious household and to borrow a measure of her cunning and experience if needed. “Surely, there could be something that could be done to aid Robb?”

“It’s in the hands of the gods now,” Catelyn shook her head. “Pray to the Warrior to keep his sword hand strong and his blade—sharp. But perhaps it would be a good idea not to keep all our eggs in a single basket.”

“You can’t mean Winterfell might fall!”

The cry woke Edwyn, who announced his displeasure with a mighty wail. Artos and Lyarra followed suit, and now Myrcella was forced to grab the twins and deposit them in Catelyn’s waiting arms while she picked up her boy and softly rocked him.

“Do not let arrogance go to your head, for it can easily be your undoing,” Robb’s mother warned as she pulled aside her loose robe and plugged the weeping babes with a hefty breast in each mouth.

“Very well.” She focused on softly cooing at Edwyn, who quickly calmed down and decided that grabbing for one of her golden locks was far more entertaining than crying. “Who would you send off?”

“Rickon,” the words were uttered with the greatest reluctance as if they raked at Catelyn’s throat. “To Last Hearth.” Near his Uncle Benjen, who commanded nine thousand men, was left unsaid, but Myrcella still heard it. “Umber has a younger daughter and a son his age. As for Arya... the First Flints.”

“Sending off a girl to foster implies some sort of betrothal or even marriage,” Myrcella frowned fiercely. “Surely, she could find a far better match than mountain clansmen?”

“The Northern Mountains are one of the safest places for anyone named Stark. Besides, Arya’s great-grandmother was a Flint of the Mountains, and the clansmen have longer memories than most. They are not the same as those savages in the Vale. Do not disparage them, for they are the fiercest supporters of House Stark, and it would do well to reward such loyalty.” Her good mother’s voice was cold, and Myrcella turned to her son to hide her bashfulness.

“Perhaps the gods will take pity on my poor girl, and some boy will catch my daughter’s eye. I know... it’s not the best match. But Arya is too much like a wolf. No matter how many lessons I give her, how many different approaches I try, or what I try to teach, she remains too wild to be a proper lady. At least... at least she could visit me in Winterfell often, should she wed in the Mountains. They always come to Wintertown in winter, after all.”

“Very well,” Myrcella nodded, noting to pull in more clansmen and spend more time with Lysara Liddle. “Not Sansa?”

“It’s better she stays here,” Catelyn closed her eyes, looking particularly tired. “Sansa is four and ten now, and it was time to start looking for a proper match.”

Author’s Endnote:

Starring: Ned “My patience is slowly but surely dwindling. At least Tywin would totally keep the kingdoms together while we’re away.” Stark. Robb “Plenty of loot and hostages for everyone. I’m sure there’s more to go around,” Stark. Victarion “Great man, almost Ironborn. I will battle against him in the afterlife,” Greyjoy.

The Free Cities are in turmoil (slave revolts, wars(Tyrosh) and more(to be revealed in the coming chapters), and Westerosi are a sign of trouble –remember, Tyrosh was dragged into a war, we have plenty of slave revolts, especially in Volantis where a famous sunset knight is involved. And obviously, the Essosi scoff at the supposed honour of the Sunset lands.

Robb has plans.

Renly is trying to fish out an old Kraken, and he might just catch him.

Rickon keeps dreaming stuff. We see the three babes; poor old Cat has been hardened by loss.

OC list introduced in this chapter:

Nysaro Narratis-pentoshi nobleman (magister) with silver hair, blue eyes, and plump. Envoy.

Hostages Robb caught–Sers Reynard and Triston Rowan, Lord Wilbert Footly, Ser Egbert Footly, Lord Ronel Cordwayner, his son, Ser Renald Cordwayner, Sers Harrold and Perryn Osgrey. Lord Myles Cobb and his sons, Rodden, Deddings, Perry, and more.