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

4th Day of the 12th Moon

The First Ranger, Outside the Wall

Benjen had hoped otherwise, but his nephew and Maester Aemon were proven right - the wights were real, and the brothers liked it little. Regardless, they sallied out, prepared to fight them and relieve the fort.

They had to abandon their steeds; none of the horses wanted to get close to the tide of wights drowning the wooden fort. The hounds were much the same. Fighting in the night was messy. The lights of the torches and fires blurred together in the eerie chaos as the living and the dead clashed amidst the snow.

A familiar chill lingered into the night. Benjen had ranged into the Frostfangs in winter but had never felt the like of it... save one time. It was so *cold* that it seeped through the thickest of fur and wool, straight into your bones, into your soul. But he was a Stark, and ice ran in his veins.

All wights were slow and clumsy, even if some of their instincts before death lingered. The lumbering carcasses had greater strength than in life but used it poorly. Attacking mindlessly, they lacked the discipline living men possessed but never tired in return. It was a different battle than what the First Ranger was used to - mindless numbers versus discipline and... torches.

Slaying dead giants was somehow easier than slaying living ones, Benjen decided. Once you set them on fire, they burned like kindling and usually set the surroundings aflame as they fell, the blaze spreading through the clustered wights.

Benjen couldn't help but thank the long-dead smiths of the Freehold. Whatever magicks they had woven into Valyrian Steel seemed to cut through the Other's cold sorcery, but only if you sliced through the spine or the skull. It appeared that the powers kept the wights moving resided there, and when Benjen lopped off a head from a wight, it stopped moving instead of continuing to claw and grab with its darkened limbs.

"HOLD THE LINE, DAMN YOU!" Mormont's hoarse cry echoed in the frigid darkness. "MORE TORCHES TO THE RIGHT FLANK. MARKSMEN-"

The voice was drowned out by the bone-chilling screeches. The air grew even colder, and every mouthful of air burned their throats with cold. The spiders were not only here, but the shrill shriek was coming from the rear. Everything suddenly turned more chaotic, and the lines began to falter as some men

turned to the back. Benjen cursed and pushed into the back line to face the Cold Gods. Surely enough, they were cleaving a bloody line through their reserves, straight towards Mormont. The Lord Commander was barking orders upon orders, but everything was such a mess in the dark as the sea of torches merged in a blur, and he struggled to tell what was happening.

Benjen, however, was *ready*.

Lunging forward through the frigid chaos, he swung Longclaw into the neck of an Other, busy killing his way towards the marksmen and Jeor. The Valyrian Steel sank into the pale, translucent flesh with a wailing *crack*, and the icy foe crumpled on the ground. Benjen was already stabbing Longclaw into the next one. The third Other turned in time to parry his sword, the collision between spell-forged steel and ice producing a lingering sound akin to a beast wailing in pain. Benjen ignored the two eerie eyes, so blue like burning ice, and pressed his attack.

Parry, dodge, slash, cut, deflect, riposte; it was a deathly dance; every strike of their blades sounded like a wailing snow-shrike. Benjen knew his ringmail would not hold out against the crystalline blade, while Longclaw couldn't slice through their delicate mirror-like armour. Yet it didn't matter. Benjen had run such a fight in his mind for moons and moons. Every morning, Benjen awoke, thinking of how to combat such a foe better. Speed, strength, skill - every little scrap would make a difference. Every day in Castle Black, he pushed himself harder than before, honing his skills and body to the limit, and now the fruits of his labours were paying off.

In the corner of his eyes, he saw a giant frost spider heading his way from the side, but then an enormous black blur crashed into it with a rumbling growl, and the keening wail of dragonsteel and frost was soon joined by pained shrieks. More Cold Ones seemed to be also heading his way, but some of the black brothers began to rally to him. Glass-tipped spears blocked the advance of most, but two slipped through.

Yet before they could flank Benjen, they were met with a fat man in a red robe with a green flaming sword and... Oberynd Martell. The bloody rogue had doubtlessly slipped to join them in the fight, but the First Ranger felt thankful. The princeling held a Cold Shadow on his lonesome, if with little struggle. On Benjen's other side, a figure resembling a... drunken red priest was also battling a Cold Shadow, the Other shying away from the green flames of his blade.

Grimacing, Benjen returned his complete focus to the vicious exchange with the Other before him and ducked out of the way of the crystalline sword. The Cold One moved with otherworldly grace and speed, but the First Ranger could match it, if with some effort.

Every strike was powerful enough to rattle Benjen's wrists, but it wasn't as bad as he remembered. The pressure wasn't as terrible as the first time when he was utterly unprepared, and now the First Ranger started to notice things.

The Others were strong and deathly quick but fought with unmatched aggression and crude technique. Such a style heavily relied on the mirror-like armour that covered their limbs... but the joints and heads were half-bared. It reminded Benjen of a novice knight relying too much on his armour and brute strength against green recruits, if far faster and stronger.

But once the First Ranger noticed this, things became a lot simpler. To the side, a cracking wail and a whoop of joy indicated the death of another Cold Shadow, reminding him he was not fighting alone.

The chance showed itself soon enough. As the icy blade descended from an overhead slash, Benjen parried aggressively, striking it sideways. Now, the Cold One was wide open, if only for a heartbeat, but that was all Benjen needed, as nothing could stop Longclaw from striking the Other's undefended neck. The Cold One seemed to realise it too, as the malevolent blue eyes widened for a second, but Benjen was already in motion, completing the riposte.

A cracking wail followed as his foe crumbled into shards of ice with his blade and armour, quickly melting into the cold slush below.

Benjen, heaving for breath as misty puffs escaped his throat, looked around; the chaos had worsened, and the lines were already faltering. Jeor Mormont's hoarse cries no longer echoed in the night, only the grunts of fighting, the shrieks of the spiders, and the curses and howls of men fighting and dying. While the flaming green sword was still eye-catching, Benjen could no longer see Oberyn in the chaos.

Desperately, his eyes scanned in hopes of finding the Lord Commander. But no matter how hard he looked, there was no Jeor Mormont or archers; all he saw were Others, wights, and ice spiders.

The left flank had buckled already as the wights spilt into their side. Someone had to take command, or they would perish here. Some of the men were already fleeing into the night. No amount of training could substitute experience, Benjen realised. Midnight trotted over to him, snout covered in ichor, and pulled onto his black cloak, awaking him from his stupor.

"TO ME!" He shouted as Longclaw beheaded yet another wight in his way. Benjen kicked away a second one and took a deep breath. "TO ME, DAMN YOU! FORM UP AROUND THE FIRST RANGER! TO ME!"

Some of the fleeing watchmen halted, and groups of clustered torches and glass-tipped spears tried to move his way. It was not enough. Longclaw danced, cleaving through the wights. Men, women, children, even stags and wolves, all with eerie blue eyes, fell one after another.

Damn it, he wasn't meant to lead. Benjen was just a third son, meant for no glory or lands. He tried remembering his father's lessons, but his mind came blank. Clumsy, uneven lines of men were being reformed around him, but it was not enough. With wights to one side and ice spiders and Cold Gods to the other, they were fucked. Benjen lunged forth, parrying an icy blade about to sink into Jeremy Rykker's ribs.

"To me! I am the sword in the darkness!" he cried out. His throat was hoarse, and his voice grew weaker still, especially as he struggled for breath as he tried to keep up with the Other before him. One did not simply shout and fight at the same time. The jolts of pain going through his wrist with every block were beginning to take their toll, and Benjen's arms began to grow numb.

From the side, a black-tipped spear stabbed into the neck of the Icy foe, who gave out a chilling wail as he crumbled into shards. It was Obery, wild-eyed and face splattered with gore and soot but sprouting a wide, cocky grin, joined to his left with a spear in one hand and torch in the other. Jarman Buckwell, Alan of Rosby, Stonesnake, Chet, Black Bernar, Luke of Longtown, Fulk, Tom, and many more familiar faces rushed to him, hope in their eyes.

Benjen took another breath.

"I am the watcher on the walls!" Other voices joined him. More and more men flocked to his side, torches or spears in one hand and shields in the other, forming a line, if a bit uneven. Even the Red Viper and that red priest joined, hollering together.

"I AM THE FIRE THAT BURNS AGAINST THE COLD!" Hundreds of men bellowed together as one, noble or pauper, knight or thief—it did not matter, for they were all brothers of the Night's Watch. Their roars tore through the eerie night like a thunderclap, and Benjen felt the exhaustion in his limbs lessen. The cold no longer bothered him as much.

"I AM THE LIGHT THAT BRINGS THE DAWN!"

The Others halted then; Benjen could count a dozen of them. They all turned to look at him, but the First Ranger saw something new in their merciless blue eyes.

Something he had never seen before and did not believe possible.

Hesitation. *Fear.*

"They came to us from every corner of the realm." It was the feeble voice of Aemon, echoing like a dirge into the solemn courtyard. The old maester was standing stiffly before an enormous pyre filled with corpses. Over four hundred brothers had died, half of whom couldn't be recognised. It was hard to get the number of the dead because of the charred bones - when someone fell, the Others were quick to raise them again. "From the North to the South. From West to the East. They died fighting against the gathering darkness, protecting men, women, and children who will never know their names or sacrifice. It is for us to remember our brothers. And now their watch is ended."

"And now their watch is ended," hundreds of voices echoed as Benjen tossed the torch into the pyre and watched as the flames bloomed in large orange petals, engulfing the corpses. Next to him stood Midnight, no longer a pup. The black direwolf reached his chest and was bigger than a pony already.

Benjen didn't expect his companion to join the battle, and it seemed he had sneaked through the gate after them. Three spiders had fallen to his fangs, and only gods know how many wights. His hide was covered by a few gashes from the spider's barbed legs, but nothing serious, according to Maester Aemon. A few patches of fur were also missing from the cold hands of the grasping wights, but those would grow again.

A cold, sobering dawn greeted them, and Benjen didn't think he would make it alive. But he did, and despite being wounded, so did many other black brothers, some of them missing ears, eyes or even a limb. Yet they lived.

And they prevailed!

There were even a dozen survivors in the fort, covered from head to toe in gore and glory.

They had spent the better part of the morning sifting through the slush and charred bones, gathering their dead and wounded, when more reinforcements from the stewards and builders rode out of the Wall. The day, nay, the night had been won, but at a hefty cost.

Everything that wasn't sore was covered with bruises, and Benjen had a few shallow wounds from the cold blades of the Others. His wrists were also jolting with pain after the brutal punishment he had put them through, and Aemon said it would take a good part of the sennight to heal and advised against any strenuous activity involving the arms. But everywhere he went, the black brothers, old and new, nodded or gazed at him with respect. There was even a hint of fanatical reverence as if he were Symeon Star-Eyes come again. Some even whispered 'the Black Wolf' as he passed, and Midnight would walk straighter then as if he understood.

The dead had their rest now, but the living could not afford the luxury. Benjen badly wanted to sleep, but now was not the time. The Lord Commander was dead, and now the First Ranger was in charge of Castle Black until the election could proceed. Aemon had already sent ravens to the other Commanders, summoning them here.

But first, Benjen had to brave the meeting he dreaded the most.

His legs felt as heavy as lead as he climbed the staircase up to the King's Tower, but Midnight dutifully followed by his side.

A knock on the door and Ellaria Sand came out, face covered with tears.

"What do you want, Stark?" She asked harshly. Nym and Obara were just behind her, their eyes heavy with grief. They should never have come here; the Night's Watch was no place for women. Now, he couldn't help but regret falling for Nymeria and her persistent charm.

Benjen wanted to pull the Volantene woman into his embrace, whisper words of comfort, and kiss her tears away. But it was unbecoming of a man of the Watch to do so, even if it was allowed now. The

feeling ate away at his insides. Even if he did... it would serve no purpose. Benjen could not offer her a home; neither Castle Black nor Moletown was suitable. Even if Nymeria did agree... would she be able to live the life of a common woman, bereft of luxuries?

Despite being a bastard, Nymeria was clad in the finest sandsilk underneath the furs and wool and was used to the finer things nobility enjoyed, thanks to the generosity of her father.

Worse, they had only tumbled in bed once; for all Benjen knew, he was just a flight of fancy, another conquest.

The feelings were so bittersweet, but Benjen now knew why the men of the Watch swore away women.

"You have my condolences," he inclined his head mournfully. "Oberyn was a brave man."

"I want my lover back, not some pittance, cold suit of battered steel, and boiled bones," she hissed. It was all that was left of the Dornish prince. The man had fought like a whirlwind, his blood burning for the fight, yet he did not realise he was injured. The icy swords slipped through the armour, and their cold kiss could be as gentle as a breeze. Near the end, Oberyn just keeled over from blood loss, and it was too late by the time the battle was over. They brought back his corpse, but the eyes had gone blue, and Marwyn and Aemon advised to boil the flesh away before Oberyn awoke again.

The First Ranger felt very conflicted about the Red Viper. None would disagree - the man was a respectable warrior if a tad too foolish for sneaking into the battle as he did. The ice blades of the Others cared little about who was a Prince of Dorne or a baker from some village in the Reach. Yet the man eagerly joined them in the fight despite the odds.

"He fought bravely and slew two Cold Shadows," Benjen said. It would not do to speak ill of the dead; his father taught him better than that, and he would not begrudge a lover's grief. "You three ought to leave the Wall."

"Are you chasing us away, Stark?" Obara asked dangerously.

By his side, Midnight snarled, but Benjen placed a hand on his neck, silencing the direwolf. He was too tired to deal with this. Instead of sleeping, he had fought into the night and then helped collect the bodies of his fallen brothers and had no patience left to deal with Oberyn's hotheaded daughter.

"It is First Ranger to you, Sand," he reminded stiffly. "If I wanted the three of you to leave, you'd be out within the hour. You can take my advice or continue with your stubborn ways. The Watch cannot spare any men to send the Prince's bones to Sunspear, and unless you plan to join the Order, you ought to leave. I have duties to attend to and cannot stay here to guard you three from unwanted advances like your father did."

With that, Benjen turned around and decisively went down the stairway, too irate to deal with the three Sands anymore. A rush of soft footsteps followed behind him.

“Wait, Benjen.” Nymeria’s melodic voice made him halt.

“Look,” he sighed and turned to face her dark, smouldering eyes. Even rimmed in red, they looked beautiful. “The thing between us... it cannot be. I told you before, but you’re too stubborn for your own good.”

“Children of the desert often are.” She gave him a watery smile that made his insides twist. “I... don’t blame you. Don’t take Ellaria and Obara’s words to heart; their grief runs hot. My father died doing as he always wanted to - spear in hand, facing a worthy foe in battle.” Nymeria leaned in from the step above, her nose almost touching his, and he could feel her hot breath upon his skin. “One last kiss?”

Benjen wanted to say that he rebuffed Nymeria's advances, but that would be a lie—the kiss was too sweet, and so was everything that followed.

A short nap, if temporary, staved off the exhaustion. Benjen could sleep when the sunset, but there were too many things to do for now. The fastest raven had already been sent to Winterfell, informing his nephew of last night's developments.

Tactics and results had to be reviewed.

He sent the Old Pomegranate, Marsh, to find that red priest from the battle while he waited in the Old Bear’s solar. But it didn’t belong to the old bear anymore, for Jeor was dead.

"Corn, corn," the old raven cawed. Benjen tossed a handful of kernels near the perch; the big black bird jumped and started pecking at them fervently.

There was a knock on the door, and the man in red robes pushed it open. Now, without the chaos of battle and the darkness of the night, Benjen could finally take a better look at the priest. He was almost as tall as Benjen, with broad shoulders yet a belly that reminded him of Hugo Wull, if lesser. With his shaved head and stained robes, he looked more like an old patron in a tavern than a priest.

“What’s your name, priest?” Benjen asked. “I did not think to see men of the red faith at the Wall.”

“I am Thoros of Myr, First Ranger.” His genial voice matched his round face. “I am not a great priest, in truth, but I daresay I am decent with the sword. And you need more swords to fight against the Great Other, do you not?”

“That we do. That blade with green flames was quite impressive.”

“Alas, ‘tis but a trick with a flask of wildfire,” Thoros sighed. “It ruins the sword afterwards, and I only have two left.” And thus made it useless. It looked fancy, but Benjen knew all too well the dangers of green piss, which was only made in King’s Landing.

“Do you know some fiery magicks? Such things would be mighty useful against the wights as you saw for yourself.”

“Alas, I’m afraid my skills end with the blade,” the red priest shook his head regretfully. “But the Wisdoms in King’s Landing might be able to aid you.”

“I thought they only dealt with the green piss?”

“It is their crowning glory, but I daresay the pyromancers know the art of flames second only to the High Priest of R’hllor. There are many ways to make a fire, and the Wisdoms claim to know them all.”

The red priest could not provide further wisdom and was dismissed. Thankfully, Thoros seemed intent on joining the Order as a ranger instead of lingering in the Sept like the Septon Cellador. Benjen couldn't help but imagine the headache a preaching red priest would bring him. At least the Myrman was more of a swordsman than a clergyman.

Benjen's weary mind moved to Thoros' last words. He held no love for the pyromancers; his father had met an ugly end amidst the green flames in the Red Keep. But experts on fire sounded far too necessary to pass over. Fire was the third most valuable thing to the Night's Watch after men and obsidian, as last night's battle had shown.

Pushing down his dislike, Benjen stood up and headed to the rookery. He could make this decision after consulting Aemon and Marwyn. Besides, it was not confident that any pyromancers would entertain an invitation to the Watch or the Wall.

6th Day of the 12th Moon

Myrcella, Winterfell

The news of her father and Uncle Stannis' death was odd. Myrcella was... numb and didn't know what she was supposed to feel since neither her stiff uncle nor her father had been particularly close to her. The whole thing seemed suspicious, but Tommen and Lord Stark were already out of the city, so things were fine. Joffrey would ascend to kingship... which would be fine with her grandfather guiding him as a Hand. Tywin Lannister was almost undisputedly one of the best statesmen the realm had at this moment, and if anyone could reign in her brother's proclivities, it would be him.

Tension mounted in Winterfell as if Catelyn and Robb were expecting *something* terrible to happen. But the realm was at peace—the only ones not bound by blood to the Throne were the Reach, Dorne, and the Iron Isles. With Theon hostage here, Balon Greyjoy would be a fool to move, Dorne would never stir alone, and Margaery Tyrell was the perfect candidate for Joffrey's queen.

Her mother, however, in her infinite wisdom, had decided to wed Joffrey to Myrielle Lannister instead.

At least Eddard Stark had laid a solid foundation for a peaceful realm, and even with Cersei's folly, Myrcella struggled to see where a problem could arise. There was nothing to fear aside from whatever dark myth and legend were brewing in the Lands of Always Winter, but the Watch bolstered considerably. Those... Others and wights could be slain, so she was confident they too would meet their end against the might of men, just like the Giants and Children of the Forest of yore.

Still, the Tyrells wouldn't move on their lonesome, and they'd never lay in bed with the Dornish, for the animosity was too great there.

Still, happenings in the South aside, things were going rather well.

The guest house was finally rebuilt and was now double the size it was before. Her efforts had begun to bear fruit. Dark clay tiles covered the roof, and the brick walls were covered with some fancy white plaster from White Harbour - the builder explained some things about a putty of lime and gypsum, but Myrcella did not care about that. What she did care about was that the snow-like mixture looked *pretty* and could be formed into decorative shapes. Thus, the walls of the guest house were covered with running direwolves, crowned does, the occasional roaring lion, and many other geometrical figures.

It made for an intricate picture that was more than pleasing to the eye. And the best thing - it didn't cost half as much coin as Catelyn had feared, even after adequately furnishing the insides. It looked far better than the drab old guesthouse of wood and undressed stone. The insides were also warmer than before, with more comfortable furnishings that still seemed Northern without the overly elaborate trappings from the South.

The broken tower had been pulled down and rebuilt from the ground, just like the First Keep, which would become her own personal ladies' parlour. Even five blocks of white marble with black veins from the Vale had been sailed up the White Knife for a sculpture and the lining of the floors. Myrcella wanted it to look the best. Though there was a limit on how much coin she was willing to spend, making things too opulent would also be an eyesore. There was a line to be walked between austerity and beauty.

Myrcella couldn't help but notice that House Stark's connections were frankly ridiculous. No door was left unopened, and manpower and resources were not a problem as long as they could be found in the North. The marble was her greatest expense, at just over four thousand dragons. Even this price was relatively low, as a favour from House Waynwood, because of Eddard Stark, of all people, not her status as a princess.

The craftsmen Myrcella had poached on the way to the Wall were all too happy to join Winterfell's employ, though she didn't get as much as she wanted because Robb had drawn a line. Perhaps it was true that the Watch needed more skilled men than Winterfell.

At least the brick and tile kiln made a profit moons earlier than she had foreseen. Myrcella's demand for only the most durable and highest quality from her establishment paid off. Bricks and tiles sold out in

Wintertown was like freshly baked bread from the royal majordomo in King's Landing, and every new brick produced that was not needed for her project was bought out within a *day*.

Though, it was not all good. Autumn had arrived, and with it, snowfall. Outside had become too cold for her liking, and Myrcella preferred the warmth of the Great Keep and Great Hall to the chill, mud, and slush outside. She was tempted to have all the courtyards of Winterfell cobbled with marble or stone so she could walk on them more easily. Yet, even her grandfather would balk at the cost of such a project, let alone the frugal Lady Stark. It did not help that pregnancy had made her fatigue far faster, and her patience was far shorter than usual.

Becoming round, bloated, and ungainly was an unpleasant experience and would have made her feel ugly if Robb didn't seem to be enamoured with her swollen teats as if he were still a babe.

With her trips to Wintertown and the glass gardens drastically reduced, Myrcella spent all her free time on embroidery, reading and reviewing the ledgers, numbers, and reports, and helping Robb and Catelyn with their duties around the castle.

Now, Myrcella was with her good sisters and ladies, working on stitches and embroidery. Grey Wind's enormous head was lazily resting on her lap, keeping her pleasantly warm while embroidering her new red scarf with black does and grey direwolves. It was a gift from an Essosi merchant, woven from the finest Norvoshi wool that was light and as soft and smooth as silk, nothing like the crude Westerosi counterpart.

A cunning man, in truth, for after Myrcella had gone around with one, all the ladies in court had gone to the man, eager to buy some for themselves and clearing out almost all of his wares.

"Rickard Liddle was quite dashing in the yard today," Serena Umber said with a lilt as she toiled over a heavy woollen cloak, sewing pieces of brown fur to the sides.

Branda Dustin snorted. "Too cocky."

"You only say that because he keeps winning against your brother," Wylla Manderly tittered, earning herself a scowl from Branda.

"Roderick Dustin is three years younger," Sansa, sitting next to the Dustin maiden, pointed out without moving her gaze from her own Norvoshi scarf. Some days, Myrcella suspected her good-sister liked the Dustin heir, but it was hard to tell. Sansa observed all those heirs and second sons that passed through Winterfell like a hawk, content to watch from afar with an unreadable face.

It was the perfect time for Sansa to be betrothed, and Catelyn had subtly expressed her desire to have her daughter close, which meant that she was to be wed in the North, but no particular candidate for a spouse had been decided just yet.

Arya, however, was another matter altogether. While still under punishment, her training was not restricted... as long as she attended dancing and music lessons. It was amusing to watch the tug of war between the Lady of Winterfell and the little hellion, though Arya did have some talent in the flute, even if her dancing and singing were atrocious. Myrcella suspected Catelyn would be at her wits' end with her younger daughter, but progress was made, if slow. If only the girl would stop sending her hawk with her wolf into the woods.

With so many ladies in Winterfell, many first and second sons lingered around, and Robb had recruited his own close circle. Jon Umber, Eddard Karstark, Roderick Dustin, Arlon Knott, Cley Cerwyn, and Dayn Slate could oft be seen together with Myrcella's husband, no matter where he went. The Greyjoy hostage was sidelined, making him sulk and spend his time in the archery yard and the whorehouses in Wintertown.

"Jonelle is fat like a cow-"

"Did you see Daren? The fool was garbed like a peacock-"

"They said the king won the boulder-lifting in the Tourney-"

"When do you think your brother will return, Sansa-"

"Have you heard? The Leech Lord approached Edwyle Ironsmith for the hand of his daughter-"

With a shake of her head, Myrcella focused on her embroidery while listening with half an ear to her gaggle of tittering ladies. Even the young ones like Beth Cassel, Lyanna Mormont, and Joy Hill eagerly took part with wide eyes, even though the princess suspected they did so more out of enthusiasm than of knowledge and interest.

While sometimes it felt too crowded, her ladies-in-waiting were helpful and, most importantly, loyal, if somewhat stubborn, as expected from Northmen. Only Lyanna, who had learned to be a lady from the Hightower woman, and Joy were less rigid.

Myrcella was also well-informed of the minor matters in the North; all the gossip from the nobility and most of that through the smallfolk made its way to her ears. That's how she knew about Lord Ryswell's sons quarrelling, the influx of merchants from Essos and the South towards the Gift and Eastwatch and many more like Lord Bolton looking for a bride. All the Northern bannermen had proved recalcitrant, for his previous two wives had somehow died suspiciously. The reputation of the Flayed Man didn't help much either, with some wondering if he would look to the South instead.

A knock on the door had them all quiet for a moment, and the door creaked open, Rickon's scrunched-up face sliding through.

"Myrcella, Robb is re-recasting your presence in the lord's solar."

"Requesting, you mean," Brenda Dustin cooed at the youngest Stark, joined by Serena and Wylla. Predictably, Rickon childishly blew them a raspberry and slipped away.

With a groan, Myrcella stood up and made her way out, lazily followed by the enormous form of Grey Wind.

Robb *never* summoned her like this before, so it had to be urgent.

Rickon was still loitering in the hallway, face gloomy. As usual, Shaggydog was not with him, probably 'stolen' again by Catelyn.

"Don't you have lessons to attend?" Myrcella nudged him, cursing her swollen feet. Walking was a pain, and the lord's solar was at the top of the bloody Great Keep.

"Luwin's busy, and I did my training in the yard for the day," Rickon muttered as they made their way to the staircase. "I had a bad dream again."

She perked up; his dreams were always so colourful and full of imagination... when he remembered them, which was rare. "Did you dream of your brother again?"

"Uh-huh. He was almost buried by the icemen. Everything was more messy than Arya's room, and I think I saw Uncle Benjen, too. There were big hairy blue spiders in the dark." Rickon scratched his head, his face twisting in a thoughtful frown as they slowly ascended the staircase. "I want Jon and father to come back."

"Your Lord Father is on his way back," Myrcella tussled his hair, eliciting an outraged squawk in return. "Soon, he'll return."

"And what of Jon? Nobody wants to play with me now!"

"Your brother will also come back when he's had his fill of adventure," she gently deflected. Truthfully, Myrcella had no idea what was happening with Jon Snow in the seven bloody hells, and nobody could tell her anything. Even Robb remained silent, no matter how much she cajoled him. Enfeoffed or not, the Bastard of Winterfell had yet to show his face in the Seven Kingdoms as if he had disappeared under a rock.

Rickon's face, however, turned hopeful. "Do you think he'll take me with him next time?"

"Perhaps. You ought to ask him when he comes back." Myrcella sighed. Rickon badly needed a companion his age. Tommen would be perfect, for her brother was coming back here as a page to Lord Stark, but perhaps another young boy would not be amiss. However, she would have to discuss the suitable noble sons from the North with Catelyn for proper fostering.

After what felt like forever, Myrcella finally conquered the staircase, short on breath, and made her way to the solar, as Rickon finally lost interest and ran down, probably to watch the men spar in the yard or to raid Gage's kitchen again. As she took a short rest, a languid Shaggydog and a tired Catelyn also came up the staircase, her round belly noticeably bigger than Myrcella's.

Exchanging a glance of understanding, both of them continued down the hallway.

The guardsman at the front announced their arrival and opened the door with a bow.

Robb was sitting in the lord's chair, his face like a frozen mask. Two rolls of parchment were on the desk before him.

"Mother, Myrcella," he greeted as they sat on the tapered chairs. His voice seemed somewhat troubled, and his face grim.

"Has your Father finally arrived in White Harbour?" Catelyn asked, blue eyes full of hope. It's been over a moon with no news now, more than ten days longer than the journey from King's Landing to the Manderly Seat ought to take by sea. It was not uncommon for delays to happen in seafaring, but with every next day where no raven came announcing his arrival, Winterfell grew tenser.

"Nay. But two ravens arrived today from the South." He stiffly picked up the right one and handed it to his mother. "This one is by Renly Baratheon from Bitterbridge. He declared himself king with the support of Lord Mace Tyrell." Her husband picked up the other letter and handed it to her. "King Joffrey has called the banners."

Catelyn's face grew pale, while Myrcella felt lightheaded.

Author's Endnote:

Starring: Benjen 'Why is shit hitting the fan so damn quickly, yo?' Stark, Oberyn 'for wine and glory' Martell, Thoros 'at the Wall, I get to fight harder and still drink, nobody can blame me if I just... ditch King's Landing, surely' of Myr, Myrcella 'surely, nothing to go wro—oh wait, wtf mom, Uncle Renly?!' Stark

Myrcella's castle sim is going well... until it isn't. Sucks to be undermined by dear old mom. Slowly but surely, she becomes the most informed and well-connected person in the North. For reference, she has not gone through even a tenth of the coin gifted to her by Grandpa Tywin, so have no fear; she isn't splurging on a fleet, constant feasts, and overly generous tourneys, after all. Labour is dirt cheap (cuz this is the Middle Ages), only materials, transportation, and master craftsmen are expensive (and the last could be bought with promises of honour and glory of immortalising their work wherever).

Norvoshi wool - ASOIAF cashmere equivalent, because why not? I contemplated having it originate from Lhazar, but after throwing a coin, Norvos won (plus it already had that goat theme rolling, while Lhazar was all sheep!).

Rickon continues having... dreams. But he isn't seeing the future, so what exactly is he seeing?

The Watch officially wins its first battle against the Others, and Oberyndies... to his recklessness.

Overall, I'm not... thrilled with how this chapter came out, but I didn't want to get into endless battle/dialogue etc, and the chapter was becoming too damn long already.