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I already knew that Winterfell was a massive structure from my magical dream, but like with Casterly Rock, seeing it from above failed to show the true scale and incredible effort that had gone into building it.

We'd seen the peaks of the highest buildings – some that stretched what looked to be thirty to forty metres over the height of the walls – a day before arriving at Winterfell, though we'd stopped at Castle Cerwyn the night before where many houses that didn't have keeps north of Winterfell had broken off from the host and head home.

Yet seeing in the evening and night before was nothing to approaching it as the sun hung high above. The castle was massive – easily able to swallow Sunspear and the Shadow City within its walls – ringed by two walls with several buildings rising higher than the inner wall. The outer wall alone was impressive, standing somewhere between twenty and thirty metres while the inner wall looked to be another ten to fifteen metres above that. In the far leftmost corner of the keep, the leaves of the massive weirwood tree at the centre of Winterfell's Godswood spread out, fanning that section of wall in a blanket of red.

When those leaves had first become clear, my mind had wandered back to my magical awakening dream; in particular, who I'd spoken to there. More than likely the Three-Eyed Raven would be able to see me through the weirwood, but I wondered if I'd receive any further dreams or a vision brought on by him or the Children of the Forest. I'd prefer if that wasn't the case, and he just stuck to observing me as, based on what was shown in the show, I wasn't a fan of his. Still, if he did speak with me, and brought up Alysanne, I might well ask him how things had changed with her being here instead of Jon.

As the front of the column reached Winter Town and I saw Ned raise a hand towards a group of people who'd gathered there, I turned my attention to my riding companion, Theon Greyjoy. In the nearly two moons we'd been riding for, he'd never spoken a word to me if I hadn't engaged him first, and even then, his replies were short, vague, and subdued. This made sense as he'd only just seen his father's head caved in by Robert's hammer and been taken hostage first by Robert and now Ned, and it had given me time to push my feelings regarding his canonical betrayal of Robb to one side. His lack of interest in conversation had made it hard to create any headway in potentially turning him away from the Ironborn ways, and what little I might've made was probably undone by comments – some subtle, some not – regarding the Ironborn in general and Balon Greyjoy in particular.

Still, while Theon's lack of interest in talking had made most days boring, it had allowed me to focus my attention on my magic. While training up **Fire Magic** wasn't doable – not unless I wanted to explain why I was riding a horse with a lit candle during the day – I had managed to get a few levels in both **Air Magic** and **Water Magic**. As expected, they levelled far slower than **Fire Magic**, **Water Magic** being the slower of the two but any growth was worthwhile compared to doing nothing while I rode.

Mealtimes had been more enjoyable as first the Greatjon then other Northern lords and warriors had begun to regale me with stories about my birth father. Some, well most really, weren't suitable for a child's ears, but Ned either ignored that, or simply didn't hear some of the more vivid stories, yet from all of them it was easy to see why Brandon had been called "The Wild Wolf" and as we approached Winterfell, I had to wonder if I had some half-siblings dotted around the North.

The sounds of cheering as we approached Winter Town drew my attention and I saw that Ned had slowed the column to a virtual crawl as he leaned from his horse to speak with a handful of residents. While the place was largely deserted – it was summer after all – I'd been told that when winter came it filled rapidly and became the sixth city in Westeros. Once we started moving a few people looked at me and Theon and whispered. While Theon got a few glares – understandable as under the thick fur overcoat he was wearing his surcoat sported the Greyjoy sigil – most seemed confused with me. I wasn't wearing anything that signalled where I came from, only wearing simple black breaches striped with purple, a sleeveless black velvet shirt embroidered with purple scrollwork and held closed by silver fastenings, my black snake glinting upon my arm and purple cloak trimmed in black fox fur over my shoulders, the fact I was riding a Sand Steed was the only thing to identify Dornish roots, though I doubted any smallfolk in Winter Town knew where the horse came from, I suspected my purple eyes and black hair started a few rumours on the spot.

"It no' much to look at now, but come winter you have a hard time moving through the streets at this time o' day."

I turned to see Rickard Karstark had ridden up beside us. The tall – though nowhere near as tall as the Greatjon – man nodded to people watching us, then after reaching into his wools, tossed a coin – what looked like a silver stag – to two children that appeared around my age. Rickard had spoken with me several times on the journey, but I'd always felt there was something off about him. Like Theon, that might be my opinion of him in the show bleeding through, but I felt it was more than that. Almost as if he didn't like me, a bastard of Brandon Stark, being back in the North.

"That would be something to see."

He nodded at my reply before speaking. "Aye. People come from all over the North in the winter, when it be far colder than now," he added with a smirk as he glanced at Theon who I caught muttering about it getting colder even as Rickard continued. "Might even pass White Harbour in how many people huddle in it, but the Starks take care of them all. When winter comes, be ye Highborn or low, the North works together."

There was something in his tone that felt like a warning, yet before I could respond, he gave his horse a gentle kick and it surged forward towards the head of the column.

"Colder?"

I chuckled at Theon's muttering. "Well, it is the North, what did you expect? Dorne?."

As expected, he didn't reply, choosing instead to try and bury himself in his sabblenovercoat, seeking warmth in the furs given to him by Ned when we'd reached Moat Cailin. I'd gotten a fur overcoat as well, but I was finding the weather tolerable - which was why I was wearing a lighter cloak - which was likely from having some resistance to the cold and having, in my previous life, grown up in Scotland.

As we passed through Winter Town, my attention was taken up by the massive walls of Winterfell as they rose in front of us. There was no moat outside the outer wall, but one could be dug quickly in the case of an approaching army. I spotted dozens of guards manning the two towers of the gatehouse along with four more standing to one side as Ned led the column inside.

"What?" I was broken from my thoughts as my horse walked through the outer gate. A strange, both foreign and familiar, buzz tingling throughout my body, making the hair on my arms and legs stand on end. I didn't know what it was, and as my eyes snapped around looking for the source, I realised it felt like a mild electrical shock.

I barely processed that between the two walls was a moat that was perhaps about ten metres wide and that wooden pathways were running from ramparts to ramparts before I passed through the inner gatehouse. As that happened, I felt another shock pass through my body, though this one was stronger, as if I was closer to the source. My eyes shot around, ignoring the various movements in the courtyard for the moment as I searched frantically for whatever had caused those odd sensations; and why no one else seemed to have felt anything. "The hell was that?" No sooner had I muttered that to myself than I spotted a notice in the corner of my vision, which I quickly opened.

Magical Area Entered!

Winterfell

As the blood of the Starks is strong within your veins, while you are within the walls of Winterfell, all magic relating to the Starks gains a 5% boost in power, duration and magic level growth.

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"M'lord?" My head snapped to the voice to see a young man, perhaps an older teenager had come over and placed a hand on the reins of my steed. "Lord Stark has requested you present yourself to him immediately."

I blinked, regaining my bearings, placed the notice from my thoughts for now, and took in the courtyard. All around various lords were sliding from their horses. Some were heading towards other people in the yard - likely friends or family - while others pushed on in a group towards the central keep which stood above all other buildings. There I saw Ned along with an attractive redhead, who I assumed was Catelyn Stark nee Tully, and what had to be the rest of his family.

"Thank you." I slid off my horse - who Oberyn had gifted to me nameless and thus I'd named Rowan - with far more ease than barely a month ago, but two moons straight of riding had gone a long way to improving my comfort in the saddle; along with removing, or at least numbing, any sense of saddle-sore. While I'd never gotten to ride Rowan at anything more than a trot, Ned being too cautious with me for that, Rowan had easily outpaced any Northern horse and I suspected that he would best any non-Dornish horse in a race. "Can you find a warmer stable for him? He is a Sand Steed and not built for the cold." My hand ran down his neck,

letting him know I was leaving for the time being. I would return though, not just to ride him but, if I figured out how to, to practice skinchanging.

"I shall speak to the stablemaster, m'lord." I nodded my thanks before heading towards the steps of the Great Keep where Ned and his family were gathered. I had to dodge around people, horses and wagons in a yard that put a football pitch to shame, but since no one was moving that quickly it didn't take me long to reach the Starks.

Ned was kneeling to greet his children, while Catelyn was glaring at Obara, seemingly not approving of how close my stepsister was standing to Benjen. As I got closer, I saw that the pairs arms were clasped, publicly declaring their relationship, which was possibly the source of Catelyn's ire as I doubted that she had kind thoughts towards the Dornish after the Rebellion; thoughts that would only get worse the moment she learnt Obara was a bastard.

"Nuncle." Ned turned and stood as I spoke, lifting Sansa – her hair the same vibrant red as her mother's – in his arms. "You wished to see me?"

"Nuncle?" The question came from a boy at Ned's side and going off his height and looks, this was likely to be Robb. However, my attention was instantly drawn to the other boy standing next to him. Unlike Robb, this boy had dark brown hair and grey eyes, looking far too much like Ned to be anything but a Stark by blood.

"Yes, Robb. This is Cregan Sand, your cousin by my brother Brandon." In a moment I'd seen coming when I'd first heard I'd be going to Winterfell, Catelyn's eyes narrowed as she glared down at me, though the intensity of the glare softened quickly as she got her feelings, whatever they may be, under control.

"He was killed by the Mad King right?" That drew my attention to the sixth person standing with the Starks – even if she was a little further behind the main family – Alysanne Snow. She, like Robb, was about a year younger than me and unlike Robb had the dark brown hair and grey eyes that were common for Starks. Hells, if not for the younger boy who was a spitting image of Ned, I'd say Alysanne was the most Stark-looking of us kids.

"Cregan Sand, baseborn son of Brandon Stark and Ashara Dayne at your service, my lady." I bowed to her in an overly dramatic fashion. Yes, it was silly, but it would, I hoped, move things past some of the formalities. While there was some emphasis placed on it, Northerners, from what I'd seen, were far less interested in such things than the southern kingdoms. After rising, I turned and bowed to Catelyn. "My Lady Stark, I thank you for being willing to house me while I foster in Winterfell."

Intentionally I stayed in the bow as I'd rather not be drawn into the inevitable interplay between Lord and Lady Stark. Plus, by remaining bowed like this, I was shifting the onus onto her to allow me to stay, and after revealing my parentage, and making it clear I understood I was a bastard, I hoped it would alleviate some of her inevitable anger towards me being a threat to Robb one day becoming Warden of the North and Lord of Winterfell.

"And we are happy to have another member of the family, even a bastard, staying with us." Her tone was sharp, making it obvious to any with emotional sense that she wasn't happy with me but was willing to accept it for now. "Please rise."

As I did I saw Ned was pinching the bridge of his nose with his free hand. "I thought we went over this, You might not have been trueborn, but like Alysanne you are a Stark by blood." What was left out was that Ned insisted that I didn't have to bow to him or his family because of my blood.

"Aye, uncle, we did. And while I'm sure that's fine for Northerners, Lady Stark, like myself, was raised in a southern kingdom; though the Riverlands are far more temperant than Dorne," I tacked that on to make it clear I wasn't suggesting I came from the same place and station as Catelyn. "Not only is she the wife of a Lord Paramount, but the daughter of another. To not show her the respect her station deserves would insult both sides of her family." I smirked as I glanced at Obara. "Plus, uncle Doran would likely tan my hide for showing such disrespect."

I heard Ned give a small snort, and as I glanced up I saw the faintest of smiles had crept onto Catleyn's face, and while she still didn't look overly pleased about my presence, I'd take any crack in her armour if it made my stay here more tolerable.

"Uncle, mayhaps you might introduce me to my cousins?" That drew a smile from Ned and helped Catelyn's smile grow fractionally.

"Cregan, these are our children; Robb, Beron and Sansa," as he introduced her, Ned shifted his arm around to expose her face. While she was very young, the resemblance to her mother was clear to see. "And Alysanne, like you, is a bastard," his face slipping a touch when he said that.

"I think my mother mentioned meeting her when I was very young," Ned's face tightened for a moment, and while he hid it well, I knew he was frightened that my mother had revealed Alysanne's heritage to me. While I think most people failed to see it, I didn't and neither, interestingly, did Alysanne. "She said when you brought **Dawn** back to Starfall you had a babe with you."

"I never expected she would ever mention that." Ned was certainly hiding any panic he may have felt but his face was tightening further the longer we spoke, and as he glanced at his wife it likely didn't help assuage her fears at all, luckily for him someone cut the conversation short.

"What's **Dawn**?" the question snapped my eyes to the middle Stark child; and the one that shouldn't exist. The implications of Ned having another son, and one older than Sansa, were immense. If the timeline continued as it had in canon – and that wasn't a certainty – then what would be Beron's fate? Would he, like Sansa and Arya, be in King's Landing when Ned was executed, or would he stay in Winterfell after Robb called the banners? If Theon still betrayed the Starks, would Beron die at Theon's hands, alternatively would he hold the castle against Theon and throw the Ironborn from the North, or would he be with Robb in the Riverlands?

“**Dawn** is the ancestral blade of House Dayne.” The only thing surprising about that answer was who provided it. There was a glint in Alysanne’s eyes as she looked at her younger ‘brother’ which drew my attention. While **Dawn** may have come up in one of Maester Luwin’s – Luwin was the Maester at this time if I remembered right – lessons, the fact she could so easily recall that was interesting.

“How you get that scar?”

“Beron!” Catelyn snapped at her youngest son, as I blinked to cover the fact I’d almost got lost in wondering about Alysanne and Beron’s roles to play in what was to come. While the question was a personal one, Beron was just young enough that he’d likely not understand that. Or would play dumb to get away with it when Catelyn berated him later about it.

The question itself wasn’t a problem, as it had come up several times on the ride north as while most Northern lords and nobles had heard what I’d done, they seemed to enjoy getting me to retell it. Though the Greatjon complained that I never varied nor embellished the story; claiming the greater the legend behind my scar and sword – which was probably back in Dorne by now along with the other side of my family – the more girls would like me. Ned had never found that funny, but the Greatjon and others had. For safety, I played dumb about his implication.

“Mayhaps we may continue this inside?” Ned offered as Sansa bounced gently in his arm. “It’s been a long ride and I, for one, would enjoy sitting with my family for a meal for the first time in many moons.” He glanced over at Benjen. “And for some, years.”

Benjen laughed lightly at that. “Aye, I would love that. I have sorely missed the food from home.” He pulled Obara closer to him. “While I also enjoyed Dornish fare, Winterfell will always be home.” Ned nodded and turned even as Benjen smiled at me. “And, perhaps, once we are seated, Cregan can tell you how he got that scar and a Valyrian steel blade.”

Even as I glared up at my uncle, my cousins who could walk all gawked at me.

“And how he became ‘The Bloody Wolf’.”

My glare shifted to Obara for her comment, but like with Benjen, it had no effect. At least on me. Catelyn’s brow crinkled after hearing Obara speak; likely because not only had Obara spoken freely, but because of the nickname Robert had bestowed upon me. Hopefully, that little remark wasn’t going to cost me any ground I’d made with the Stark matriarch.

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... .. (~2nd moon 290AC)

The arrow flew from my bow and as I tracked its flight, I watched it strike the target, which was a good fifty paces away. It wasn't a great shot, only just inside the second ring out from the bullseye, but given it was closer than any of the two dozen arrows I'd shot before, I'd take it. Even though my overall **Bows** skill was average, that was locked up in **Shortbow** and while, technically, the bow I was using could qualify as such, since it was almost as big as I was tall, I was being forced to use my **Longbow** which was far worse. Now, since there was a difference between my **Longbow** skill and the overall **Bows** skill, I got a boost of half the difference to the sub-skill; though that still left me ranked as Deficient with a longbow. That had pissed me off but given after just two-dozen arrows I'd gained a handful of levels, I could live with it. Though when it came to other combat skills it was more aggravating.

"Yay! Cregan!" The cheer for me had come from Beron as he stood looking down on me from a walkway that overlooked the archery section to the training yard. My cousin, who was barely past five, had taken an instant liking to me, which was both a blessing and a curse. While I enjoyed the attention of the younger boy, and it helped make Ned and Robb more comfortable with me around, Catelyn didn't like her son following the bastard of her former betrothed around. Thankfully, in the half-moon that I'd been here, she'd been too busy looking after Arya who had been born a few moons before we arrived. That, plus my promise to keep an eye on my cousin and Ned's word had made her reluctantly willing to allow Beron to, within reason, follow me around when we weren't in classes with Maester Luwin.

Likely Beron's minder was a member of the household staff, though given I hadn't heard him saying his name over and over, I knew it wasn't Hodor. I'd been curious if the gentle giant – and given he was taller than the Greatjon, I suspected he had some giant blood in him – would still be as he was in the books and show, and finding he was confusing. On one hand, if he'd been born a simpleton then it was fine, but if it had been something that happened when he was younger, then did it mean that Bran's future – and thus mine – was hard locked? I just needed to find a moment where I could ask about it without it seeming like a strange question to ask.

Giving Beron a salute with my bow, I turned to my right to see Robb and Theon aiming at their targets. While Robb's had only five, no six as one clipped the edge, in it, Theon's was peppered with arrows and all of them were better than my most recent shot. Robb muttered something to Theon, but the older boy didn't react.

I wasn't sure if it was Robb's choice or instructions from Ned, but he'd been trying to get closer to Theon ever since we'd arrived in Winterfell. Oh, he still made time to get to know me, and had enjoyed hearing – before Catelyn cut me off – about how I won **Red Rain**, but his focus was mainly on Theon. Yet no matter how much Robb, me or others tried, the Greyjoy boy barely responded. Now, I could understand that in Maester Luwin's lessons, just like with every Maester when I first met them, I was forced backwards in my learning as they didn't think I knew as much as I claimed. Thankfully, that had been rectified by holding a short conversation with Benjen in High Valyrian and proving I understood more advanced concepts. Robb hadn't liked being shown up like that, and Beron's hero worship was not helping, but the fuck was I wasting a year of learning to deal with my cousin's ego. Either he'd grow out of it and see me as a challenge to meet and surpass or, following canon, he'd become closer to Theon.

The thump of another of Theon's arrows striking the target – this time clipping the bullseye – drew my thoughts back to the Ironborn. While he might, if the timeline still followed the canon path, turn on the Starks, the fact his sister was in Dorne – and I admit that was something that continued to play on my mind – and his father, the one who'd turned him back to the Iron way, was dead, I was hesitant to see him following that path in this verse. A small smile came to Theon's face as he lowered his bow, though it vanished an instant later. That was the first sign that he was enjoying something, and possibly that the cockiness that he'd had in canon was already in there just waiting to come out.

“Boo!”

“Beron!”

I bit my tongue to not chuckle at the interaction of Beron and Robb; who was glaring up at his brother. Even though it'd only been a few weeks, I was already enjoying Winterfell. As much as I missed Sunspear, growing up without many male friends – as most gravitated to Quentyn who hadn't yet gotten over me accidentally striking him because of his dumbass friend – wasn't something I'd noticed until arriving in Winterfell. I might only be here for a year, but I was already enjoying the company.

“How are you so good at this?” I doubted he'd answer, but even if nothing had so far worked, this was another moment when I had a chance to get him to open up. If this kept up past the new moon in a week's time, I'd likely put the issue on the backburner and focus on improving my skills.

“Been doing this since I was five.” Theon's mumbled answer caught me off guard. “All Ironborn must know how to fight. When we turn twelve, we can join a crew and learn the Iron Way.”

“But why the bow and not the sword?” When we'd trained in the yard under Rodrik Cassel, while he'd been older than me, I'd been able to take him in most of our spars. Hells, even Robb had won a few spars against him.

His brow creased and I thought for a moment I'd pushed too far. “Just better with a bow I guess. When I line up a shot, I feel,” there was a pause as he seemed to search for a word. A second later he shook his head and blinked. Almost as if surprised with himself for opening up. without finishing, he turned, pulled a new arrow from his quiver and then nocked it.

I fought off a sigh. While I'd found a chink in his mental armour, it wasn't quite enough for him to open up fully. Still, as I copied him by nocking a new arrow, I at least knew I could break through the armour.

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“We are not supposed to be down here.”

I rolled my eyes at Robb’s words as I led him and Alysanne down into the lower levels of the Winterfell crypt. I’d first come down here, though only to the second level, with Ned a few days after arriving in Winterfell so he could show me the statue of my father, Brandon Stark. While seeing that, the statues of my ancestors, and the crypts waiting for Ned, his children and those that followed made me feel part of something far larger than just the family I knew, what had caught my attention had been the fact there were multiple levels to the crypts. Which was why I was down here, with my cousins in tow.

“Aye, you may have said that before, but that is half the fun of it,” I replied as I held the torch above my head to illuminate the steps that would lead us down to the fourth level. Now, to be clear, my intention wasn’t to get them in trouble, but about a moon after coming to Winterfell, I’d started having dreams of the crypts. Since I didn’t have **Prophetic Dreams**, I knew there was something else going on here, and since the dreams started a few days after first entering Winterfell’s Godswood, I had a fair idea of what, or should I say who was behind my dreams. Though not why I was getting them.

The Godswood was impressive, massive and had an almost primordial presence to it, and apart from that granted a 5% boost to **Greensight** along with a smaller 2% boost to **Skinchanging** provided both I and the animal I was trying to enter the mind of were in the Godswood. Otherwise, it was 1% if one of us was there. However, my reason for going there the first time had been to speak to the heart tree and the person behind it. After seeing a raven caw down at me and then making sure the area was clear, I’d spoken to the tree, making it clear that I understood that something had changed within me (my magic awakening) but that I didn’t know what it fully meant. I’d also added that while I knew this was somehow linked to my First Men blood, the only magic I’d unlocked was fire magic and proved it by making the flame on the candle I’d brought dance.

Revealing all this to the Three-Eyed-Raven might be a risk, but I felt it made more sense to make it clear that I wasn’t a threat, and that I knew the dangers in the Far North. I’d hoped that would, at the very least, get him to leave me alone and not try and make me his replacement. Given the dreams, I suspected I had. Which, when combined with what I’d sensed coming from below Winterfell during my magical awakening, was why I was down here.

So far, I’d come down to the crypts five previous times, however, I’d been caught by Robb and Alysanne after my third time. After convincing them that I simply wanted to explore and learn more about our heritage, Alysanne persuaded Robb to come with me. While that had made these into bonding sessions with the pair, it meant I’d had to waste my last two trips exploring areas I’d already wandered. Well, almost wasted. When we’d first stopped at the most recent statues, Alysanne had been drawn to Lyanna’s statue. That was the only

one with bones within as Aerys had ordered my father's and grandfather's bones be thrown into Blackwater Bay but hearing that Alysanne felt a kinship with her 'aunt' had me debating revealing the truth to her. In the end, I'd decided against it as I didn't have any proof and doing so felt like it'd do more harm than good.

The more I explored the crypts though, the more I realised that with the thousands upon thousands of bodies potentially buried down here – and likely in other places across the North and Westeros – the Others had a ready-made force already inside the walls of the castle. The show had (in another very badly set up part of the last season) hinted at this, but seeing it poorly conceived on screen was nothing compared to walking among these potential enemies, though maybe the magical protection would stop that.

"Father will not be pleased if we get lost down here, or worse."

Again I rolled my eyes, though this time at Alysanne. The girl was a mess of contradictions. Whenever she could she spent time around Obara, all but taking Oberyn's bastard daughter as a role model to such a degree that I'd heard Obara complaining to Benjen about not getting a moment to themselves because of her shadow. Yet at other times, she acted like a quiet and demure girl of noble (or in her case, semi-noble) standing that obeyed Catelyn's instructions almost religiously. It made sense since Alysanne wasn't the threat to Robb that Jon had been – or that I was – but it was still concerning to see her show interest in being a 'good little maiden' and following the Seven.

I shook my head a touch in annoyance. Having Alysanne play the good noble bastard girl helped hide her heritage, which was why I assumed Ned allowed it, but for some reason, it irritated me. I did admit that my thoughts might be comparing her to Jon Snow too much, but she was a daughter of a dragon and a direwolf, not a timid fucking trout! Which might be part of why I'd been fine with her joining me and Robb in these explorations.

"Then we get lost." My retort was shot back as I peered into the darkness of the third level. Seeing nothing, I moved forward, curious as to which lords we'd find down here. The second level had held the crypts of most of the Lords of Winterfell since the Targaryen conquest, and while seeing the tomb of my namesake, Cregan Stark, had been interesting, it wasn't what I was looking for. Though I hoped when I found it, I'd know what it was, as apart from these trips turning into bonding sessions with my cousins this felt like a wild goose chase.

The first few statues were worn, with the names hard to make out so I kept walking until I found one with a readable description. "Alaric Stark, son of Beron, I think," the engraved words were worn from age and dampness," King of Winter. Succeeded by his son, Torrhen."

A sharp inhale had me turn to see the pair looking at each other. I raised an eyebrow, wondering what the issue was.

“Th-that... Alaric was the last King of Winter before the dragons came.” As Robb explained I glanced at Alysanne. Every time the Targaryens came up I had to fight the urge to see her reaction, but with it just being the three of us down here I wasn’t concerned about Ned catching me. Still, finding the last King of Winter was a good sign. Whatever I’d felt in my magical awakening, and I was sure it wasn’t just the fact Winterfell granted a magical boost, had to predate the conquest by millennia. The odds of what I was looking for being on this level were slim as fuck, but at least I felt like I was on the right path. “His son Torrhen...”

“Bent the knee after the Field of Fire,” I cut in, making it clear I knew what he was on about. “A smart choice, even if I imagine many Northern lords hated him for it.” As much as I wanted to head lower, I knew that would have to wait. “Come on then.”

I walked past Alaric’s statue, wanting to explore as much as we could of this level today.

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“And what in the names of the Gods were you doing that deep in the crypt?”

While Ned’s tone was quiet as he spoke, there was no mistaking the anger developing behind it. Sitting behind the large ironwood in his solar as he glared over at me, I saw just why the nickname of ‘The Quiet Wolf’ wasn’t an insult. Ned was reserved and calm, and while the fire of a wolf boiled under the surface, he kept it in check. Most of the time, I suspected. Beside him, Catelyn wasn’t even trying to hide her fury and if looks could kill, I’d be a pile of ash on the floor.

“After you showed me my father’s statue, I was curious about who and what else was down there,” I replied, drawing on my experience of facing down superior officers when any operation had hit the fan. “Robb and Alysanne discovered I was doing this and, to make sure I would not get lost or hurt, as he knew I was not going to stop, he and Alysanne came with me.”

Catelyn flinched in her chair and moved as if to stand only to stop as, I assumed, Ned placed a hand on her leg. While I doubted that she’d attack me, I wondered if she felt I’d taken Robb into the crypts so he could suffer an ‘accident’ and make myself more likely to inherit Winterfell. That logic failed as Benjen was still around, but Catelyn had always been very protective of her children and their legacy.

"And yet, the three of you did find trouble." Ned's gaze bore into me, though I didn't wilt, before turning to his son. From the corner of my eye, I could see Robb sink in upon himself as his father levelled a look of immense disappointment at him. "What if something had happened you had been trapped down there?"

"If we failed to return by dinner, Erac would have found you." I wasn't stupid enough to go searching in the crypts without someone knowing and Erac was the only person in Winterfell I trusted to not instantly tell on me. Well maybe Obara, but if I'd told her she'd have likely wanted to come with, and as she wasn't a Stark by blood or marriage, that might well have made things worse.

"So you told your guard that you were going down, but not that my eldest was with you?" Catelyn's question was all but spat at me as her anger slowly turned her face the same colour as her hair.

The urge to retort that Alysanne was also there slipped onto my tongue, but I stopped it from sliding out. No need to further antagonise the woman or draw Alysanne into her wrath.

"Cat." The single word from Ned as he moved his hand to her arm settled much of Catelyn's anger. Or at least drew it away from the surface as she kept trying to kill me with her glare. "Now, there is nothing wrong with any of you wanting to explore the crypts. I did the same with my brothers and Lyanna," his eyes darted to Alysanne and away so quickly that if one didn't know the truth, you'd think nothing of it, "when I was your age. It could be seen as almost a rite of passage for any Stark, be they true or baseborn. However, most never go down to the third level, let alone the fourth." If I guessed right, I felt he was curious as to why we'd gone so low.

"I, uh, wanted to learn more about my ancestors. I explored a lot in Sunspear." That was only partly true as while I did want to explore Sunspear, and Oberyn would likely not have an issue with it, due to my age and my mother's protective nature, I'd never managed to explore anywhere outside of the more common areas of the keep. And I'd certainly never found the hidden passages Oberyn had hinted at.

"Winterfell is not Sunspear, and while I am... willing to let you explore further," Catelyn's head twitched to look at her husband, "I have to insist that not only are either myself, my wife or Maester Luwin made aware, but that you never head down alone. Am I clear?"

"Yes, father." "Yes, uncle." My reaction came out a split second after my cousin's, but that didn't seem to matter to Ned. Considering the matter closed, he nodded and then gestured for us to leave, which we quickly did. While I didn't rush out of the solar like my cousins, I was glad to get out of his line of sight. Seeing the icy anger in his eyes was a reminder that while he might've been raised by Jon Arryn, and thus had a strong sense of honour, he was a wolf at heart.

"When are we going down again?"

I chuckled at Alysanne's question. We'd been caught on our sixth trip together down, and while it'd only been a few months since they'd started joining me, her more assertive side was creeping out. As Robb stopped to look at his sister, I saw a twinkle in her eye that had been there since we'd discovered Alaric's statue. The wolf inside was slowly creeping out, and I for one was glad to see it.

"What? Father said we were forbidden from going down again." I shook my head at Robb's response. Had he missed the hint Ned had dropped at the end?

"No. He said not to go alone. That just means we need a guard to go with us. Right?" She looked at me as she finished.

I nodded. "Aye. And I am certain I can get Erac to come with us." I smirked at knowing the guard who'd come north with me would come even if he didn't want to. The instructions from my mother and Oberyne had been clear that if anything happened to me he'd pay for it. "Though mayhaps we wait a few days at least before going down again. I would rather not have to worry about Lady Catelene killing me."

Alysanne chuckled at that while Robb looked pensive. "Can we take Theon with us next time?"

I blinked. "I, uh, I guess we could. If he wants to." I felt it was unlikely he would as, while he'd begun opening up to Robb and me, I'd rather not have him learn how expansive the crypts are just in case his path still ran along canon lines. Still, at least inviting him might help bring him closer to the Starks, or Robb and Alysanne at least.

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I slid back, or I tried to. The ground was muddy and gave less grip than I wanted. Thankfully, I moved enough that the blunted blade that came at me only caught air. That left my opponent overextended, but I didn't counterattack. Instead, I took the time to steady myself and my stance.

Robb brought his training blade back in line, stepped forward with small feints, and then thrust the blade towards me again. Instead of sliding away this time, I raised my shield around and braced. While the blade didn't get past the shield, the force behind it, and the angle it stuck at, were enough to make me stumble back. I felt my right foot slip in the mud and unable to stay upright, dropped to a knee.

"Stop." The shouted order from Rodrick Cassel was enough to prevent Robb from taking advantage of my slip. As I stood, he moved closer. "Robb, your early attacks were reckless. You over-extended each time, not only leaving yourself open to a counter, if Cregan was skilled enough to do so, but gave him time to reset before your next attack. Your last attack was not nearly as bad, though that might be because Cregan was unable to set himself up properly." Robb's shoulders slumped, but I didn't worry about it. He was a fast learner and with me here to train with it might help him aim a bit higher in an attempt to match my skill. This was due to not just my age, but the fact I seemed to learn things quicker, and that I had previous combat experiences to call upon. "Cregan, when you blocked Robb's last attack, you took the strike head-on. While that does protect most of your body, it meant all the strength in his attack was sent into your shield, which is why you lost your footing." Rodrik took a step closer and placed his hands on the rim of my shield. As he continued talking, he slowly moved it around. "If you angle the shield like this then the attack will be diverted. This'll allow you to displace his centerline and leave him open for a counter while conserving energy. Though that's for a later lesson."

His tone left no room for argument so I nodded. "Yes, ser."

A grunt escaped Rodrik before he took a step back. "Good. Return to your positions." I walked forward a dozen or so steps then readied myself. Robb was only a few metres away and the moment he could, he'd attack.

I lifted my shield to cover my chest but left it low enough so I could over the rim. While we were both still learning how to fight with a sword or shield, I knew from my past life how important reading someone's footwork was; provided you had time to do so. While this exercise was a simple attack/defend setup, we'd trained individually to get the basics down to avoid injuring ourselves and each other when we did these exercises. There were moments where I felt this was boring, and I'd heard Robb comment as much on more than one occasion, but I knew it was needed. After all, train hard, fight hard, and win.

I knew Alysanne was off to one side with Obara and while Catelyn had forbidden Alysanne from joining our training – and I was far from impressed with Ned for allowing that as Alysanne was a wolf, not a trout and the North had warrior women of its own – that hadn't stopped Obara from teaching my cousin when she could. Catelyn wasn't impressed about that, but since it was clear Benjen wanted Obara to take to wife, Ned was allowing it; though I did wonder how far he was willing to let things go.

I knew from Obara's rants that several offers had come in, including at least three Northern houses, for Benjen including one from House Mormont, but it seemed as if Benjen had made his choice. The problem, and not just with Catelyn, was that Obara was a bastard while Benjen was from a Great House.

“Begin!”

Rodrik’s call brought my mind back into focus as Robb rushed toward me. The blade came in, aiming for my thigh. I tilted my shield as Rodrik had instructed and felt Robb’s attack glance off the wood. Seeing he’d again over-extended, I twisted and smashed my shield into his chest.

“OOF!” his breath knocked out as he was knocked onto his back.

“Cregan!” As Rodrik shouted at me I mentally cursed myself. I knew I shouldn’t have done that, but a decade of combat training had, once again, slipped in and I’d reacted on instinct. Great if I was in combat, but something that kept getting me in trouble with Rodrik in the yard and Catelyn once she found out. “What did I say about counterattacks?”

“Not to, ser Rodrik.” I didn’t bother explaining myself as, after doing this several dozen times since arriving in Winterfell, it was rather pointless. I glanced towards the Great Keep and while it was hard to see, from where I knew the Stark private quarters were, I swore I saw a swish of red from one of the windows.

Well, she already disliked me, so another round of glares and less-than-subtle warnings weren’t going to change anything. Not when Ned, Benjen, Obara and Robb had no issues with my mistakes.

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... .. (date: v late 290AC)

“To Eddard Stark! Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North!”

“Lord Stark!”

The call from Galbart Glover was met by everyone in the main hall of Winterfell’s Great Keep; me included.

We were a few weeks from the end of 290AC, and the houses had gathered to celebrate Ned’s nameday, and offer gifts to Robb – and to a lesser extent Alysanne – for missing his nameday a moon or so ago while also holding a festival celebrating a successful harvest. Apparently, these feasts were held every few years when it was summer, and the weird seasons were something I was still getting used to.

Still, it was hard to believe Ned was only six and twenty (in Westerosi numbering terms) as he looked far older, though what he has gone through would have aged any man prematurely. As for the feast, while not up to the standards I'd grown used to in Sunspear – to say nothing of those laid on by Tywin Lannister while Robert had been in Casterly Rock – it was enjoyable, reminding me of Christmas and Burn's Nights in my old life in Scotland. Even down to underage drinking.

And at that, I took another sip of the Dark Northern ale I had. While it was enjoyable, it lacked the spicy aftertaste of Dornish wines but had more of a kick to it. Something proved by the fact the room was beginning to move.

I looked around the room, seeing everyone I could see enjoying themselves as Galbart Glover sat down. Well, almost everyone. Theon looked like he was rather uncomfortable, and since he wasn't seated beside Robb – or me though we were at the same table – that was understandable. The other person who didn't look to be revelling in the feast was Roose Bolton. Which wasn't a surprise. There was something off about that man, particularly around his eyes. Yet his son, Domeric, seemed far more jovial and trustworthy.

Domeric, while being a fraction shorter than me, was older as, going by what he'd said, he was about to become a squire to Lord Redfort in the Vale. He was sitting at the table with several of the children of the various lords along with me. Catelyn hadn't been happy about me sharing a table with the young nobles, but seeing as I was a representative of Dorne, Ned felt it was fine. Because of that, I'd argued for, and gotten permission for Alysanne to sit at the tables of the daughters of the lords. That had brought an amusing issue – though not for me – in the arrival of Alys Karstark as Robb liked to call his sister Alys at times. Both girls had found it amusing, and they'd enjoyed spending time together.

"Thank you for your words, Lord Galbert." Ned speaking drew my attention back to the head table where he sat with his family and Obara; which had earned a few glares from various lords. Whether that was because she was a Southern girl, a bastard, or both, I couldn't say, but my step-sister didn't react to any of it. "And thank you all for coming. This year may have started with another war, but it has been a boon for my house." He looked down at Catelyn, and in all likelihood, the crib beside her chair. Not that I could see it given my lack of height. "I returned home to find I had a second daughter, and I end the year with another son." A cheer went around the room. While I'd not met Bran yet – he was only a few moons old – I'd met Arya and while she was still a bairn, she'd seemed to like me; or at least my eyes.

"And for the first time since King Robert's War for the Throne, House Stark stands united." Ned turned and looked to his right. "My brother Benjen, has returned home."

"Benjen Stark!"

“The Wolf who beds snakes!”

I didn't know who called out the add-on, but I and most people including Benjen and Obara laughed at it. Ned simply smiled. “And with him came someone I hadn't seen since he was a babe in his mother's arms. My brother Brandon's only son, Cregan Sand!”

“The Bloody Wolf!”

I knew that voice and turned to look over at the Greatjon, and we raised our mugs to each other even as throughout the hall, people enjoyed another drink. Gods, I suspect they were so drunk by now that if Ned said he and Catelyn were going to move to Essos so he could become a sellsword they'd have cheered.

“However. HOWEVER, that is not all.” Ned had to shout to bring the volume down enough he could be heard. He pulled a parchment from his clothes and looked at Benjen once more. “Benjen, we've had several offers come in, but it was clear to me before we left the south that your heart was set on one maid.” Benjen glanced at Obara fondly as she smiled. “However, the issue has always been that Obara is a bastard; even if her father is from a Great House, marrying her couldn't happen.” He lifted the parchment above his head. “That is why, in consultation with Prince Doran and the Hand of the King, Jon Arryn, I asked for a boon from King Robert.” He handed the parchment to his brother. “In the name of his grace, Robert Baratheon, first of his name, Obara Sand is lifted to be a daughter of House Martell,” the hall had gone so quiet I could hear the staff moving around in the corridors outside the hall, “on the promise that neither she nor any children she bears, will attempt to claim the holdings of House Nymeros Martell.”

Obara sat there stunned for a moment before she pulled Benjen into a rather passionate kiss. I was one of the first to stand and cheer, and while it took a moment longer than I was happy about, the rest of the hall soon joined in. There were a few that didn't put much effort into cheering with Howar Stane being the most obvious. Though given he'd made the mistake of suggesting to Obara her place was on her knees and not the yard and thus almost lost to her in the yard was not a surprise.

When Obara slid onto Benjen's lap, laughter erupted from the hall. That grew as Ned looked around with a look of fond amusement plastered on his face. It took a few moments, but Benjen was able to get Obara back into her chair. He then stood and pulled his brother into a deep hug, which set off another cheer.

“With Obara Sand now being raised as a noble, provided you both consent, Prince Doran and I have agreed on a union between our houses.” For a second, I was worried Benjen's head would fall off with how hard he nodded. “Excellent!” He looked over to the side of the hall and nodded at Luwin before turning back to the happy couple. “Maester Luwin will send a raven to your uncle and father, and while I don't know when your union will take place, I believe your father will wish to be here for it.” He glanced my way and smirked. “And since we know a date when he will come, I think that would make a good time for the marriage to take place.” Ned raised his mug and spread his arms wide, “and of course, you are all invited to the ceremony.”

As even a blind mute could've predicted, that set off another cheer followed by many downing their mugs.

Around me, the various sons of the Northern houses broke into conversation about what just occurred, though I tuned most of it out as I considered what this meant. I'd known for a long while that Benjen and Obara were in love, but I hadn't expected this to be the outcome. Benjen not going to the Wall was a major ripple, but with the massive influx of fresh recruits from the Ironborn, it shouldn't be a fatal one for the Watch.

The union between two of Westeros' great houses was sure to raise eyebrows; especially as Ned and Catelyn's marriage was another of those. I'm sure some would wonder if this was a move to bring Dorne back into the Seven Kingdoms, though I knew that wouldn't happen from this. Hells, I doubted there would be anything that could be done to end the animosity between House Martell and Robert and House Lannister unless Tywin gave over Amory Lorch and Gregor Clegane to face Dornish justice.

A nudge from Asher Forrester drew me from my thoughts and I returned my attention to the feast.

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... .. (date:early 291AC)

I watched patiently with my cousins in Ned's solar as he turned the object we'd found over in his hands. "It's heavier than I'd expect, but not by much." Slowly, carefully, he placed it on his table before leaning forward, a twinkle in his eye. "You're telling me you found this in the crypts?" Even as he spoke, his fingers idly traced over the markings on the bronze round shield – which reminded me of a Viking round shield – we'd brought to him.

"Yes, father. We found it on the fifth level, inside a stone chest that had been damaged by one of the statues falling over." I mentally cringed at Robb's answer as he'd just revealed how deep we'd gone and that the area we'd been in this morning was unstable. From the way Catelyn's eyes tried to burn a whole through my head, it was clear she'd picked up on that.

"And why, pray tell, were you down that deep?" She may have directed the question at her son, but her glare made it clear she was already blaming me.

“Exploring.” I answered when neither Robb nor Alysanne did. “We’ve already cleared the upper three levels,” or at least as much as needed before my cousins were prepared to go lower with me, “so went down further. We never strayed too far from the central stairs, “discovering there was more than one set of stairs, while making sense in hindsight, had been unexpected, “plus Erac was always nearby.” Said guard was waiting outside the solar and would likely be questioned about why he’d allowed us to go so deep into the crypts later. Generally, it was just us four, but sometimes Theon had come with us. On one of those explorations, he’d been shocked when we’d discovered a former King of Winter shared his name.

“Hmm.” I wasn’t sure Ned was fully listening as his eyes had already returned to the shield and his fingers were tracing the engravings upon it. “These markings...”

“I think they’re runes. Like is meant to be on the bronze armour of House Royce.” I offered quickly, seeing him developing the same thought process I’d had. From what I’d learnt, House Royce, apart from being proud descendants of First Men, had bronze armour that they claimed dated back to the Age of Heroes and were covered, supposedly, in First Men runes. If these markings were similar – and I felt it was likely given the shield was made of bronze – then I wanted to learn more about the runes. Especially as when I’d picked it up, I’d felt a tingle from what I suspected was residual magic within the runes.

“It’s been a while since I saw Yohn Royce in his armour, but they look close to what I remember.” I felt my hope rise that we’d discovered something important, even if I didn’t feel it was what was hinted at in the dreams given to me by the Three-Eyed-Raven. “Still, while this is an unexpected find, and one I will send a raven to Lord Royce about, I would... we would prefer it if you didn’t head so deep in the crypts.” Catelyn nodded even as I heard Alysanne inhale sharply.

“But you said we could explore with an adult, and Erac is always with us.” I fought to keep a smile from my face at seeing her being more defiant in front of her father and Catelyn. When I’d arrived in Winterfell, I’d found her being moulded into a perfect southern lady by Catelyn, but ever since we’d been caught going into the crypts, a more adventurous and outspoken side of Alysanne was creeping out. It was slow going, but the change was happening and Obara had been more than happy to help with that, all but taking Alysanne as her squire – so to speak – in the moons since her betrothal to Benjen had been announced.

While I didn’t know what the future held for Alysanne, as the daughter of Rhaegar and Lyanna, I knew she still had a role to play in what was to come. Having her be able to fight and be assertive was better than having her be a Sansa clone.

A smile slid onto Ned’s face as he looked at his daughter, though it never reached his eyes. “Aye, I suppose I did, and this is an impressive find.” His fingers continued to slide over the shield, and something told me that even once I left after my nameday – in a little over two moons from now – he’d keep studying the shield. “That said, you are not to go down beyond the fifth level. There was a collapse on the sixth level about a hundred years ago, while the seventh was unstable long before that.” I wanted to groan as right as I was getting close, and he gave me that hint about where to search, I was banned from going there.

“Yes, father.” Robb’s response was quick and while not unexpected, and something I’d have done if the roles were reversed, the fact he wasn’t prepared to let Alysanne and me argue against this irritated me further. Though if the regular expeditions into the crypts were now off the table, that’d give me more time to practice skinchanging.

Even though there was a small boost from the Godswood, I still refused to attempt it while there. Not just because of the Three-Eyed-Raven but because I didn’t want anyone stumbling onto me while I was in the mind of an animal. Thus, I did it mainly while in my room with the door latched.

While I’d tried skinchanging with a few animals, most of the time I used my sand steed, Rowan, and even after doing it hundreds of times – for limited growth due to whatever the fuck was penalising magic – it was always a trippy experience.

I was still getting used to how strange it was to see everything being blurred beyond a few dozen feet and with everything being green or blue. I never knew until I first managed to see through Rowan’s eyes that horses couldn’t see red. Or any of the other ways their senses were different to mine. Having two blind spots – front and rear – was awkward to get used to. I’d experienced Rowan getting spooked by a stable boy while sharing his mind, but that explained why horses could be alarmed by something coming from where their blind spots were.

Though seeing through the eyes of a horse was confusing, the biggest issues had been the improved sense of smell and the sense of being prey. I knew stables could stink, but when I’d first smelt through his nose, I’d instantly ended the connection and struggled to not reacquaint myself with the pork I had for lunch. After that, I’d never attempted to skinchange on a full stomach.

Though if I’d be able to use all the free time for skinchanging was another matter. Obara’s wedding was approaching and as her only family, if only through marriage, she’d started dragging me into helping plan things. I’d have never expected it from her, but the closer her marriage came, the more she turned into an excitable bundle of nerves.

“Cregan?”

I blinked at hearing my name and saw Ned staring at me. Quickly I replayed the last few seconds of the conversation over in my head to make sure I hadn’t missed something while thinking about how to use the newly freed time.

"Yes, Uncle. I understand." Thankfully I hadn't missed a thing, just let the silence draw out as I turned my thoughts inward.

"Good. Now, all three of you go and clean up. Dinner is approaching and you all smell like you spent the day swimming in the moat." All of us bar Catelyn grinned as Ned waved us out, his eyes already drifting back to the shield.

We walked through the corridors in Winterfell, making our way towards the residential quarters. Robb broke off at a set of stairs, one guarded by a pair of Stark guards, which was only for direct members of the family. I figured Alysanne would follow and kept walking towards where my quarters were in the guest wing.

"Are we really not going into the crypts again?" Her words were barely above a whisper, but I pivoted back to face her instantly. Her face was a confusing mix of emotions.

"Not for me. I've got to help my sister prepare for her wedding, and after that, I shall be heading back to Sunspear."

Her face dropped at my words. "But your family is here." It wasn't a whine, but it was close. I'd wanted to build a friendship with her and Robb, then when I'd discovered how compliant she was, get her to be more independent. However, it seemed that some of that independence came from me, which was both odd and flattering.

"Some of it is. But my mother is in Sunspear. I... I miss her. And the family she married into." I stepped closer to her and, not wanting things to get awkward, placed a hand on her upper arm.

"I, I will miss you too." The words came out so quietly, that I was barely able to process what she'd said before she launched herself at me. Her arms gripped tightly around my neck while her head buried itself in my chest. I took a step back to avoid falling over, though that brought me up against the wall, and then slid an arm around her waist.

I'd hoped my cousins would miss me, but I hadn't expected a reaction like this; certainly not when there were still roughly two moons before I left. "Miss you too," I whispered into her ear. "And as I said, we can keep in contact via raven. I doubt either of my uncles will be against that." They might not be against it, but I wasn't sure if direct messaging via raven between Winterfell and Sunspear was possible, and it was the only thing I could say that might calm her down.

Slowly she slid back. Her eyes were wet and after rubbing away some of the water I smiled at her. “And just because I might not be here doesn’t mean you and Robb can’t keep going into the crypts. There has to be more down there. But just promise me you never go alone and never deeper than you feel comfortable with.”

“I promise.” Even though she said that the way her eyes avoided mine and her lips twitched upward suggested she would. I wanted her to be safe but confronting her on this might force her back into her shell, which wasn’t something I wanted. Still, I’d talk with Obara about keeping an eye on Alysanne. She might not have a major role to play in what was to come but she was family, and I would protect my family as best I could.

“Good, now get going,” I gave her a gentle push away, “and wash yourself. Uncle Ned was not kidding when he said you smelt like shit.”

Before she could smack me – which she did try to do – I’d already moved away, chuckling. After all, what fun was having a large family if I didn’t tease them from time to time?

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