Obligatory disclaimer: I don't own ASOIAF; that honour goes to GRRM.

Edited by: Void Uzumaki and Himura; B. Reader: Bub3loka

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

Highgarden

Garlan Tyrell

Bound by elaborate floral-patterned steelwork, the thick oaken gates of Highgarden were as beautiful as the rest of the high seat of the Reach. High-arched and tall, they were painted with an intricate golden rose that split between the middle as the gates were opened.

Garlan greeted the guards and rode Audrey, his faithful dapple-grey mare, past the open entrance. The familiar briar labyrinth was the first to greet him, walled by pale crenellated curtain walls on both sides and easy to navigate. It was doubtful whether a few thorny bushes would ever slow down any would-be invaders - the whole labyrinth was more for aesthetics than anything else.

That did not make the three layers of curtain walls any less formidable. The frivolous King Garth the Tenth, also known as Garth the Foolish, had lost not only Highgarden but the legendary Oakenseat itself, chopped by a Black Vulture. Mern VI had not only restored the seat of House Gardener to its former glory but had placed great effort in making all the fortifications quite formidable, lest the highseat of the Reach got threatened by daring raiders again.

Three crenellated walls instead of one, each higher than the last, made Highgarden one of the most formidable fortresses in Westeros, just behind Winterfell, Casterly Rock, Storm's End, and Harrenhal.

Usually, Garlan would appreciate the colourful brambles along the way, but right now, he longed for a hot bath more than anything else - to wash away the dust and the sweat from the road and rest his weary body after a hard day of riding. With a sigh, he continued to the vine gate - it was the same as the first one but decorated with lush tendrils and twigs.

The ride to the final gate was short, and Garlan was finally home.

For all its verdant greenery and elaborate masonwork, Higharden was nought but one enormous display of opulent wealth and grandeur.

All the three crenellated curtain walls and the towers and keeps inside were of white-washed stone, which almost shone under the sun. The insides were no less imposing - gold, silver, and marble were commonplace amidst delicate paintings, tapestries, myrish rugs, and luxurious velvet tapering in gold and green.

Handing Audrey's reins to the stablehand with a nod, Garlan made for his quarters.

The steward, Lorent Westbrook, with his pepper-grey hair, was waiting for him at the entrance of the Ivy Keep.

"Ser Garlan," the man greeted. The steward had grown even plumper than the knight remembered, as his green doublet seemed to be straining to hold in his girth. "Your Lord Father has requested your presence for dinner."

"Tell him I'll be there in half an hour, and quickly get me a hot bath drawn," Garlan rubbed his sweaty brow.

It was not oft that his father would summon the family to a dinner officially. House Tyrell did eat together more often than not, but it was not uncommon for them to take dinner in the common hall or their own quarters. But it made sense; he had finally returned from his father's errand.

The long hot soak that he dreamt of earlier was dreadfully short, and the young knight rushed to the dining chambers after putting on a verdant-green silk tunic slashed with gold.

The family hall was on the third floor, with colourful stained-glass windows in the shapes of flowers and petals.

"Stop dallying, Garlan," his grandmother's annoying voice was the first thing to greet him. "We've been waiting for you for ages."

"Have you really?" The knight took the seat between Willas and Margaery with a sigh. "I suppose I could have shown right up, smelling fresh of the road."

The whole family was here, bar Loras, who was still with Lord Renly in King's Landing. A dreadful squiring in truth, as the king's youngest brother was a middling knight and had little interest in martial pursuits. Still, his father's attempt at finally making a connection with the royal family had finally paid off, though Garlan was not sure if it was the correct bond to pursue.

"Fret not, my gallant son," Alerie, his mother, smiled fondly at him, "Mother is exaggerating - we've barely waited for more than ten minutes."

"I don't recall ever giving birth to you," Olenna Tyrell mumbled loudly enough for the whole table to hear. "I'm only to blame for your oafish husband."

The Lady of Highgarden pulled upon her silver braid, rose her chin up high, and pointedly ignored the Queen of Thorns. Garlan's mother never really managed to win a verbal spar against his grandmother, and she had long accepted it as a futile endeavour.

“We’re all here, finally,” the Lord of Highgarden pompously raised his hands, unphased by his mother’s sharp tongue.

“All but Loras, who is still in King’s Landing to play with swords,” his grandmother interrupted with a tut.

"My youngest son has grown into a formidable swordsman! And there's nothing wrong with staying in the capital and making connections, Mother," Mace Tyrell coughed out. "Anyway, let us sup!"

Garlan turned his attention to the succulent roast beef, steaming bread and gravy, and the next few minutes were spent in silence as they all ate. The outer layer was just as crispy as he preferred, and the insides were soft, chewy and mouth-watering.

Garlan, who had been subsiding on a simple traveller's fare for quite some time, felt like a starved wolf and refilled his plate once it was empty.

Food was an essential matter for Mace Tyrell, and all of his children knew full well that trying to interrupt a meal was one of the few things their father did not tolerate. Even Olenna Tyrell did not dare to incur her son's displeasure in such case as she supped on. She slowly spooned a small serving of mashed potatoes and scrambled eggs - one of the few fares that she could eat with all her teeth gone.

A few minutes later, most of their bellies were filled, and they patiently waited for the Lord of Highgarden to finish his honeyed pie.

With a flourish, his father took out a silken napkin and wiped the oil and crumbs from his face.

“So, Garlan,” Mace Tyrell took a small sip of spiced Arbour Gold to wash down the rest of the food, “how was your journey?”

The knight hummed thoughtfully and signalled the servant to fill his cup with sour red wine.

“Well, the roads are filled with vagrants. There’s little trouble now, but you can see more lordly freeriders and knights on patrols. Though it appears that the Most Devout has sent out the wandering septons to steer them in with offers of food.”

“And every loaf was accompanied with a serving of piety, no doubt,” his grandmother snorted. “Everyone dreams of a long summer, and when it arrives, it brings only trouble.”

And it was indeed the case - there had only been two winters in Garlan’s lifetime, both rather short compared to the enormous summer.

“Where did all those… wanderers come from?” Margaery asked curiously.

“A long summer means bountiful harvests, plentiful food, and, in turn - more babes for the small folk,” Willas inclined his head patiently. “The firstborn inherits the father’s farm, but all those second, third, fourth, and fifth sons have bleak prospects and oft leave their homes to find their fortune elsewhere.”

His sister’s face adorably scrunched up in thought.

“Can’t the lords just employ all those free hands?”

“There’s only so much land to be given out, only so many apprentices a craftsman is willing to take,” Garlan explained before taking a sip of his cup and savouring the rich yet bitter taste in his mouth for a good moment. “Poor homeless wanderers make for ill-suited and untrusty guardsmen, so most knights and lords are wary of them, too.”

“There are other factors at play here,” his crippled brother coughed. “That four-crop rotation the maesters proposed during the Unlikely’s reign also began to bear fruit - the increase in farm yields is as large as a fifth in some places and allowed livestock to be bred even in the colder moons. The bounty of long summer and peace has made steel tools almost freely available for most farmers, easing their workload."

Willas was as insightful as always; he raised points Garlan never really thought much about. Who would have thought that Aegon V's sponsorship in the Citadel would turn this way - he wanted a way to allow the poorest to feed themselves, yet the reduced workload at the farms and increased food only produced more vagrants instead…

“Bah, it’s fine as long as they don’t make any trouble,” his father waved dismissively. “Besides, this also allowed us to increase taxes with little objections,” he added gleefully. “Now, onto the important parts. Princess Myrcella has been wed to Lord Stark’s eldest.”

“Wait–” Garlan almost choked on his next gulp of wine. Willas helpfully patted his back a few times while the knight managed to cough out the errant droplets of drink. “When did that happen?”

He had been gone for less than three moons!

"The news of the wedding arrived the last moon," Willas coughed. "Even the ceremony was announced a month earlier."

The knight straightened up and scratched the back of his head.

“Isn’t that… quite rushed?”

“Indeed, royal weddings are to be a grand affair,” his father puffed, face disgruntled. “House Tyrell received no invitation!”

“Pah, the North is too cold and dreadful,” Olenna Tyrell’s tone was admonishing. “The marriage took place less than a moon after it was decided. It seems like the king was rushing to tie Stark up more than anything else - nobody south of the Neck received any invitation.”

Seven above, how many things had happened while he was away?

“So I suppose Lord Stark is the Hand now?”

“Indeed,” his grandmother laughed outright. “The silent wolf turned out a far better haggler than many thought - he got a royal bride for his son, the Handship, and half a kingdom's worth of land.”

“I doubt it took much haggling,” the Lord of Highgarden shook his head. Garlan’s father always spoke with great respect about the Lord of Winterfell. “His Grace probably easily reversed the giving of the Gift simply because it was the dragons who took it. Eddard Stark is an honourable man - he could have pushed for a betrothal of his daughter to the Crown Prince but did not.”

“Doesn’t that suit us better?” Margaery chimed in. “Mayhaps I should join Loras in court.”

"Renly's attempts to annul his brother's marriage with the lioness wouldn't bear much fruit, dear," his grandmother's words were soft and kind for the first time. Garlan's sister was Olenna Tyrell's favourite grandchild, and it showed. "Even the High Septon would be reluctant to void a marriage that bore three children. Besides, Cersei Lannister has sunk her claws deeply into the royal court. No, trying to grab the king's attention would see you disgraced like that Florent girl all those years ago."

However, the warning did not seem to deter Margaery much.

“The hand of the Crown Prince is not taken.”

“Indeed it is not,” Willas softly agreed. “Now, with his elder sister married, the king has shown that he is open to matches, and hundreds of ladies would flock to court in hopes of catching the prince’s eye.”

“Wooing a crown prince is not an easy affair,” Olenna Tyrell shook her head. “You have to not only win his heart but his royal parents’ approval.”

“But, our House is the most wealthy and powerful-”

“Both of which create plenty of enemies, both new and old. The Lord of Dragonstone still hates us,” Garlan pointed out. “And half of the Reach still lusts after Highgarden.”

“That would be true if Stannis Baratheon did not run to Driftmark after his fox-eared wife perished in a fire,” his grandmother cackled joyfully. “Mayhaps he's looking for a proper Valyrian bride to replace his cursed daughter with a son.”

“Mother, it’s rude to laugh at others’ misfortune,” Mace Tyrell chided.

“Hah, you speak as if you did not goad that hoary stag into a grudge by yourself. Taunting a starving man with feasts, peh! Be glad that his stubborn and unforgiving ways made him no friends. The day Stannis croaks, many shall rejoice, and you shall be amongst them.”

His father’s face darkened at the reminder of his failure - he had wanted to make Stannis Baratheon surrender, only to find out that the second-born stag would rather break than bend. Still, the grudge

went both ways - Robert Baratheon had crushed cousin Quentin's chest at Ashford before being forced to retreat.

"Cersei Lannister would still be a big obstacle to a union between Margaery and the Crown Prince," Willas broke the uncomfortable silence. "According to Loras, she's very mistrustful and weary of any who dare approach her son."

"Of course she would be," Olenna snorted. "The Queen's power comes from her father, husband, and sons. Tywin's daughter would want Prince Joffrey wed to someone easier to control than a Tyrell."

"The decision still lies with the king in the end," Mace Tyrell puffed his chest. "Mayhaps it's time to go to court and speak with His Grace - our House has much to offer to the crown."

His sister's eyes glimmered thoughtfully.

"Wouldn't that sour our connections with Lord Renly?"

"Not necessarily," Willas leaned forward, but his face twisted in a grimace; it seemed his leg was acting up in that particular position. "Even if you were to wed Joffrey, we'd still be wrangling with House Lannister for influence - the Lord of Storm's End would be our natural ally."

"It would be wise to solidify our control in the Reach, then," his grandmother gazed at Garlan and then at Willas with glittering blue eyes. "One of you must wed a red apple, a huntsman's daughter, a Crane, or a Rowan."

Garlan shared a grimace with his eldest brother. Neither truly desired to marry; Willas more because he was mocked for his crippled leg, and his desire for the companions of the fairer sex had soured in favour of dealing with animals. On the other hand, Garlan planned to stay unwed so his children couldn't contest Highgarden from Willas' future brood. Well, that and the fact that a wife, sons, and daughters would detract him from his martial pursuits. Yet, despite the reluctance, both of them knew their duty. After a few moments of silence, the knight finally sighed.

"I shall do it," Garlan said and took a generous gulp of his wine to try and wash down the unease. "Just pick me someone agreeable and pretty."

He had a vague memory of the daughters of Rowan, Tarly, Fossoway, and Crane but not a great impression, in truth. The ladies tended to love pageantry, glory, and fame - things Garlan had little interest in.

"I have just the right one for you," Olenna Tyrell gave him a wide, toothless smile. "You'll love her. Dainty, kind, and bright-eyed."

25th Day of the 7th Moon

Lord Yohn Royce, Runestone

The Lord of Runestone finished devouring his roasted salmon, washed it down with a gulp of dornish red, and looked at his eldest, Andar. A stalwart heir, although he failed to inherit Yohn's full prowess with a lance. It was an olden tradition for the Bronze Lord to break his fast with his eldest whenever possible.

"Have you considered names yet?"

Andar had finally wed last year to the eldest daughter of the Lord of Strongsong, Sharra Belmore. Yohn's good daughter was a tall, buxom beauty with fiery hair like her father and a kind heart, even if she was not quick of wit. Arranging that particular alliance had taken quite some time, but Yohn was happy with the result - and now, his first grandchild was on the way.

"Edwyn for a boy, Jenelyn for a girl," his heir replied as he finished his generous serving of roast beef steak. "I can't help but worry, though."

"The birthing bed is a woman's battle, son," Yohn said, not hiding his sorrow. "There's little us men can do there. Take heed, Sharra is a fit and strong woman."

By the Mother, it had been nearly fifteen years since his Alyna perished from childbirth fever. Ysilla was a joyful daughter, but every time he looked at her, Yohn was reminded of his late wife.

Still, the words did somewhat assuage Andar's worries.

"I just don't want to lose any more of us," the words were slow and forlorn, jagged heavy with feeling.

Yohn wanted to tell his son that his brother was only missing, but it had been nearly a year, and such words rang false now and would only lead to more pain. In the end, a heavy sigh rolled off his chest, "All men must die, my son - nobody lives forever. It's just the way things are. Waymar knew the risks well enough before joining the Watch."

Yet the regret of agreeing to let his youngest join the ancient order so soon would forever haunt him. He had known that Waymar's bones would never rest in the Bronze Crypt where the Royces had been interred since the Age of Heroes, but that did not lessen the heavy feeling of loss.

"Alas, who would have thought that savages would prove so dangerous," Andar's shoulders slumped, but his grey eyes glimmered with satisfaction. "At least Lord Stark shortened their foolish king a head."

"Never underestimate your foes," Yohn cautioned and raised his arm to squeeze his son's shoulder. "Least of all the desperate, savages or not - to this day, some good knights still perish to the mountain clans' ambushes. Lord Mormont did write that Waymar was far from the only ranger missing."

The ten mountain clans of the Vale might have dwindled to little more than an annoyance in the last few centuries, but the wildlings from the frozen wastes did not lack in numbers. Unlike the Mountains of the Moon, the Lands Beyond the Wall were harsh yet vast and not lacking in bounty.

“And what of Robar - is my brother still set on his path?”

"He is," the old lord sighed, and his gaze moved to his old, gnarly hands. "There are worse things than being a tourney knight, and his desire for glory and adventure is not something so easily discarded." He was no stranger to the thirst for pageantry, glory, and recognition - that passion ran in the blood. He could not begrudge his son for following in his footsteps.

“Do you think our kinsman will succeed in courting Lady Arryn?”

Yohn paused for a moment; his son’s change in topic was abrupt yet understandable - out of unwillingness to speak about his missing brother.

“Nestor will definitely try,” he said after a thoughtful silence. “He got a taste of power now and found it to his liking. Yet Lady Lysa might prove,” Yohn pulled on his moustache, trying to find the right word, “recalcitrant towards such advances. Her marriage to Lord Arryn was out of duty more than anything else.”

For the longer part of two decades, Nestor Royce had found himself the second most powerful man in the Vale, ruling over the kingdom in Lord Arryn’s name as a High Steward of the Vale. Yet now that Lady Arryn had returned to the Eyrie with an heir, all that power was gone with the winds.

It had been a peaceful time, but without a Falcon ruling the Vale, Yohn could feel turbulent undercurrents slowly beginning to move beneath the calm. With ten years of regency on the horizon, things could become unpredictable, especially since Lysa Arryn seemed more skittish than usual the last time he saw her.

“And the yearly grieving period would give her enough time to fully consolidate her place in the Eyrie, making any attempts to dislodge her nigh impossible,” Andar noted. “I’m more worried about that Braavosi upstart who’s begun to buy out debts slowly.”

Yohn couldn’t help but cough to cover his surprise - it was not oft that he was blindsided like that, let alone by his heir. Andar had never indulged in gossip before.

“You mean our master of coin? Where would you hear such rumours?”

“Aye, Littlefinger - Ser Brenon Templeton confided in me that his uncle was approached by Lord Baelish to buy off his debts.”

“Why would anyone agree to such things?” The Lord of Runestone asked, aghast. Procuring a loan was an agreement of honour or favours for the nobility, not some common thing to be bought or sold!

“I don’t know,” his son shrugged. “Even Brenon does not know much.”

Baelish was a famously cunning man known for his ability to rub two coins together and breed a third, but these new moves were alarming. Even more so when such matters were not easily spread around - talk of coin was considered beneath many.

Yet, despite the bounty of the long summer, the Vale did not lack for noblemen who threw around gold carelessly to the point of procuring debts - one of his own vassals, Coldwater, owed Runestone a hefty sum of coin.

Indeed, the undercurrents were beginning to form without a Falcon ruling from the Eyrie, and Yohn liked it not.

The king’s bold moves were also alarming, but Yohn was not overly worried - when Robert Baratheon and Eddard Stark worked together, few things could stand in their way for long.

“Keep an ear out for such things,” Yohn decided and rubbed his brow tiredly. The more time passed, the more he found his dislike for schemers and chicanery growing. But for now - there was nothing he could do but watch.

“I shall,” Andar nodded, and his face turned formal as he stood up. “By your leave?”

“Go, we all got our duties for today. I’ll grab Maester Kalon to go over Runestone’s ledgers myself.” This situation with Littlefinger had made Yohn feel a sense of unease that simply wouldn’t go away. It had been a while since such an unsettling feeling came over him, and it would not hurt to go over the finances of House Royce.

Andar bowed and left - his son would usually practice in the yard for an hour, then ride around the Royce Lands, either for a quick hunt or to address any matters of law and justice in the nearby fiefs and villages.

Just as the Lord of Runestone was headed towards his solar, Doren, a lean guardsman with shaggy dark hair, ran over urgently and spoke breathlessly, “My lord, Manderly ships are approaching the harbour.”

Fifteen minutes later, Yohn Royce was in the yard, facing a plump merman and his substantial retinue. He could see two Woolfields, a Locke, and at least five more knights and half a dozen times the number of men-at-arms.

“What brings you to Runestone, Ser Wylis?”

The Royce Lord looked at the bald, rotund knight before him. To the right stood a tall, wiry knight with curly hair, wearing a padded surcoat over a ringmail depicting golden crossed keys.

The green mermen of White Harbour were a rare sight here, and he could not recall the last time a Manderly made his way to Runestone, let alone the heir, leading more than half a dozen ships.

“Lord Stark and His Grace have entrusted a very peculiar task upon my father’s shoulders,” Wylis ran his finger over his walrus-like moustache. “House Royce’s expertise in runic inscription is unmatched in the seven kingdoms.”

“It’s been centuries since anyone had much interest in the runic script of the First Men,” Yohn Royce could barely hide his surprise.

Besides the rune-carving tradition passed down to House Royce from the Age of Heroes, there were at least two dedicated artisans in Runestone, nurtured in the art of inscription since childhood as per custom.

The heir to White Harbour looked almost troubled for a short moment, but he quickly steeled his expression.

“Lord Stark and His Grace have agreed to send a wedding gift to Khal Drogo - an enormous mammoth warhorn - polished to perfection, carved with intricate runic script, and bound by the finest gold and silver. All the work is complete bar the runes - none were knowledgeable and skilled enough in White Harbour to do the delicate work required.”

Such a thing was troubling - the crown rarely concerned itself with the happenings in Essos.

“And why would the king care about some horselord in the far-east?”

“The Khal in question was wed to Daenerys Targaryen and has at least half a hundred thousand screamers at his beck and call,” Wylis uttered, and Yohn burst out in laughter.

It took him a good half a minute to calm down.

“Has the begging dragon lost his wits?”

Even fools knew the Dothraki could not be trusted and that marriage alliances meant nothing for those who freely took many a wife. Their notorious aversion to seafaring would make them even poorer allies if Viserys Targaryen ever thought to sail back to Westeros.

Yet it had been surprising that the royal response to such a thing was so… thoughtful. Robert’s notoriously short temper when the House of the Dragon was concerned was legendary at this point.

It seemed that even after so many years, Eddard Stark still managed to temper his friend's passions - by sending such an elaborate gift, they gave the Khal a token of respect. Not only that, but it made the Targaryens know that they were watched yet not overly significant.

“Eddard Stark and Robert Baratheon shall always find aid in my halls,” Yohn declared proudly. “Do you intend to deliver it yourself?”

“Ser Donnel Locke and two of the warships shall be the ones to sail east,” the Manderly Knight admitted. “Lord Stark has requested my presence in King’s Landing.”

For a long moment, the Lord of Runestone ran a hand through his beard, considering his options.

“I shall bid my son, Robar, to aid him and three of my finest knights. It would do good for my boy to see some of the wide world before throwing himself into some youthful folly.”

Ser Wylis bowed, “Any further aid would be warmly welcomed!”

If Robar wanted to make something for himself as a second son, getting the attention of the Hand and the King would go a long way to help him. He would also have the chance to attend a royal task led by Donnel Locke, an older and experienced knight, along with the *many* things Essos had to offer. The road from Pentos to Vaes Dothrak was thousands of miles long, after all.

7th Day of the 8th Moon

King’s Landing

Eddard Stark

He slowly approached the stag, wandering beneath a tree, grazing on a small patch of grass while biting at the acorns and seeds. His paws were perfectly silent, and there was no wind. As soon as he was close enough, he pounced and effortlessly sank his jaw into the thick throat, ripping away -

Eddard Stark woke up with a start, swimming in sweat and the taste of hot, rich blood heavy in his mouth.

As usual, the sleep was uneasy. It didn’t help that Robert had driven the dawdling procession with a newfound harshness since the news of the Targaryen children had arrived. More than fifty days of relentless riding later, they were finally approaching King’s Landing. Most castles, holdfasts, and inns were skipped unless they arrived near sunset.

Although Ned had the suspicion that one of the driving forces was the Queen’s displeasure at the tempo - Robert’s eyes just lit up with glee when she looked all crumpled and tired. Still, few could say that the lioness was not a creature of pride - she raised her chin tall and rose to her husband’s challenge.

For good or for ill, many of the servants, wagons, and retinue had lagged behind, unable to keep up with the pace and would be slowly catching up over the next moon.

At this point, all Ned wanted was a hot bath, a feathered bed, and a well-roasted steak.

With a sigh, he groaned and got up. His remaining clean garments were a few hundred miles behind in a wagon, and he had only managed to get a quick wash in a cool creek two nights ago. Gods, the heat here was sweltering, and even the springs and rivers felt warm compared to the White Knife. Still, soon enough, the hellish travel would finally end.

It took five minutes for Howland to arrive after sending Alyn to fetch for him.

His friend also looked worse for wear from their rushed pace; his usually well-groomed chestnut hair was tangled like a wild bramble bush.

“Another wolf dream, Ned?”

“Aye,” a tired groan escaped his mouth. “It was not a boar but a stag this time. Can’t have a proper night of rest because of this.”

“I did tell you that all I know was from a few records of old that my ancestors inked down,” Howland shook his head. “Winterfell might have more - the kings of winter did keep direwolf companions for millennia, yet their numbers dwindled, and they eventually died off centuries ago.”

The direwolves were among the most dangerous predators, especially in packs - they were hunted down to the last in the North, despite the casualties. It didn’t surprise Ned that House Stark lost their direwolves. A poorly trained beast of this size could have easily killed a noble child, let alone an adult. A few wilder sons or daughters having their pet murder or maim the Stark Bannermen for no reason would see the direwolves killed off.

While the beasts had proven loyal and reliable companions so far, past generations of House Stark did not lack for fools or weaklings. Direwolves required a firm hand and a loving touch, things not all were blessed with.

This was one of the reasons he heavily emphasised training them - Robb and Sansa were to help Rickon and Arya.

"Magic is a dangerous thing," his friend's quiet words were heavy with caution. "You must either rule it, or it shall rule you."

Ned had always had an appetite for beef and venison, but lately, it had grown even more. However, he was unsure if it was from something else or simply the harsh travels and the smoked and dried meats that were his food of choice for the last two moons.

“Fine, fine,” he found himself agreeing. “A man’s talents are supposed to be mastered.”

In truth, Ned still felt scepticism, if not outright suspicion, about these tales of sorcery, but he did not have the luxury of ignoring them, not anymore.

It was a short quarter of an hour before they had to depart again, and all Howland had for him was a method of deep breathing and meditation - with the attempt to find a supposed connection with Winter in his mind. Ned felt nothing of the sort, but he certainly invigorated and rested in the end, which made the whole thing worth it anyway.

"Good morning, Lord Stark," it was Tommen's childish voice, and Ned returned the greeting with a soft nod - standing on too much courtesy with a young page was counterproductive to anything they would want to learn. Still, the more menial tasks like cleaning clothes and running unimportant errands were discarded in favour of more lessons and the opportunity to observe and learn.

The young prince was already waiting for him outside the tent, having his arms shined and ready, just like every morning for the last forty days. With Ice left to Robb in Winterfell, Ned had taken to his favourite longsword with a dagger for a side arm. His armour was left with the wagons with the rest of his stuff, guarded by a third of the household guard he had finally decided to take.

The harsh pace, coupled with the rudimentary training at stances and footwork each evening, had been good for the prince. Ned suspected that the soft boy had cried himself to sleep the first few evenings, especially judging by Cersei Lannister's scathing looks. Yet now, the plumpness had almost fully melted away from Tommen's face, and his movements were no longer as clumsy, and the boy had grown hardier.

Soon, Ned's destrier was saddled with Tommen's assistance, and the Lord of Winterfell was ahorse, followed by Tommen with his docile gelding.

Yet, for once, Robert did not seem in a particular rush; his pace was almost… leisurely.

"Gods," his friend groaned, "I'm not even there yet, but just the thought of the royal court makes me tired."

"Surely it cannot be that bad?" Ned couldn't help but rub his brow.

"You'll see it soon enough for yourself - fools and flatterers aplenty," Robert craned his neck forward and sniffed. "And the wind carries the stench all the way from here."

Ned was aghast - there was something foul in the air, true enough, but the stench of the road that clung to them was no better - the heat helped little.

The morning sun felt harsh and forced him to pass his cloak to Jory.

"Keep the court fool and dismiss the rest," the Lord of Winterfell proposed, half-serious. "Surely, the kingdoms don't lack for capable men?"

"If it were so easy," Robert laughed and patted his bulging gut. "But you're Hand now - you'll have the joy of dealing with them at your leisure."

Closing his eyes, Ned pinched the bridge of his nose to hide his budding frustration. As they travelled, the king's negligence only showed more - in truth, Robert Baratheon cared very little about the affairs of the realm.

"Mayhaps I'll do just that." Once he dealt with the business concerning the Night's Watch, Ned had vowed to do his very best to help his friend, both with the court and the ruling of the kingdoms.

"I've sent an outrider to tell my small council to start preparing for a tourney," the words seemed to bring back some shine in the king's blue eyes.

"A tourney?"

"To celebrate the new Hand of the King, of course," Robert waved his meaty hands with a flourish. "And the marriage of my daughter. We hogged all the festives for ourselves in the North."

Poor Myrcella was added as little more than an afterthought, making Ned wince. He was not surprised - Howland had warned him about the possibility of an upcoming tourney; according to Tyrion Lannister and a few other loose-lipped members of the royal retinue, Robert had taken every chance to host one with a great feast and a hunt afterwards. His friend's appetites for food, drink, and entertainment had grown as big as his girth.

The reckless spending of coin irked Ned, but the southern nobility, bar his good-brother Edmure, had missed Robb and Myrcella's wedding, so he could not object to the festives. Tourneys were not even that entertaining, filled with too much posturing, pageantry, and pomp where you revealed your skills at arms for anyone with a watchful eye to study - it was scarcely worth it. The practice atop a horse was not too useful; in a real battle, one would use far less cumbersome armour and aim to kill their foes, not dismount him by striking his shield or at the thickest point of the breastplate.

Training for a joust made one skilled in jousting, not warfare. It was a pity that the melee and the archery were far less popular facets of the Southron tourneys.

"If we continue at this pace, we might not reach King's Landing until midday tomorrow," Ned observed as their tempo slowed considerably.

Robert waved dismissively.

"Bah, go on and ride ahead if you're in such a hurry to drown in stench."

"I shall."

And so, half an hour later, Ned and a part of his retinue rode ahead down the kingsroad, Howland by his side and Tommen trailing behind bravely atop his golden pony.

Another hour later, and even without his fur cloak, the Lord of Winterfell began to sweat hard under the merciless rays of the summer sun.

Gods, he missed the North.

The horses began neighing uneasily, and surely enough, Winter jumped out to join them from the nearby shrubbery, snout covered in dried blood. Ned had let the direwolf wander freely, and it showed - he was the size of Tommen's steed now, and his fur was quite shaggy. Still, his companion remained receptive to his command and training, so Eddard had no reason to leash him like some dog.

Despite being close to the direwolf for many moons, most horses were still wary of the beast's presence.

With a signal, Jory, Tommen, and the rest of the retinue lagged behind a respectable distance, giving him and Howland some privacy.

"Things are worse than I feared, Howland," Ned groaned. "Robert complains about Joffrey but refuses to try and teach him, and the boy himself longs for attention and guidance, eagerly asking me many questions and joyous when I reply. The Queen tries to keep him away from me after she caught him twice coming to me with such queries."

"Mayhaps she's afraid you'll steal her third child too," the Crannogman laughed.

The Lord of Winterfell could only sigh; he could see where Howland was coming from but was not amused at the jest.

"This is not a laughing matter. Joffrey is to be the next king, but he knows *nought* of ruling."

"Unless His Grace decides to send the boy to the Night's Watch or the Citadel, there's nothing we can do but hope that the Grand Maester would manage to corral some knowledge into him." Ned was aghast at his friend's nonchalance. "Even that seems unlikely - if he learned nothing for thirteen years, I doubt Joffrey cares much for rulership, much like his father. The Seven Kingdoms has weathered many bad kings; it can weather one more. Training Tommen to be a capable Hand to his brother is the best we could hope for."

"Yet none of those kings were the good-brother of House Stark," he countered wryly.

"Do remember why we came here, Ned," Howland's words grew grim. "You don't want to entangle yourself overmuch with the court but to muster support for the Watch."

"I do plan to aid Robert in any way I can. Besides, that alliance is now sealed in blood."

The Lord of Greywater Watch shook his head.

"His Grace is all roar and bluster, not a man who truly wants assistance. No, the king's desires lie in the more baser pursuits than rulership and governance. Do what you can to help him, but don't risk your

hide for a drunken fool," Ned opened his mouth to object but… couldn't. Robert had indeed turned into such, no matter how crude it sounded. "Keep to your vows as a man sworn to the Iron Throne, not as the good-uncle of Joffrey Baratheon. His Grace has little interest in the governance of the realm - why would his son be any different?"

It pained Ned to admit it, but Howland was making a sound point. Despite the sharp words, he was glad to have brought his friend here in the South - he did give wise advice and a different outlook.

They rode in silence for some time as golden fields of wheat and barley stretched on both sides of the kingsroad. Peddlers, travelling hedge-knights, and caravans became a common sight as time passed, and all of them made way for his procession.

A gust of wind brought a heavy stench of privy, making his nose twitch.

“Gods, did it stink as bad last time?”

“The smell of smoke and death overshadowed it,” his friend darkly recalled.

That day, Ned had been so close to ordering his forces to attack Tywin Lannister as his troops were still tickling in through five of the gates. Yet the old Lion had foreseen such circumstances - he had his brother Kevan approach as an envoy immediately, clearing any possible misunderstandings.

The more they approached, the heavier the smell became - it seemed to unsettle even Winter, who looked quite wary. It took over three hours to finally see the pale battlements of the Gate of the Gods.

The sweltering weather had him reconsider employing the service of a skilled tailor - a lighter attire would not be remiss. Almost all of his garments might have been of fine make, but they were too thick and heavy for his stay here. The heat was far worse than he ever anticipated, but then again, the last two times he went so far south were in winter and early spring…

The faces of the Seven hewn in white-washed stone above the portcullis stared in judgment as the Lord of Winterfell passed below.

The captain of the gate was quick to allow him entry, and from there, it was a straight road to the Red Keep. Many stared, whispered, and fearfully pointed at Winter and his bloody snout as they passed down, making him frown.

The wide cobbled street passed between Visenya and Rhaenys’ hills, and the walls of the Red Keep could finally be seen looming atop Aegon’s hill like an ugly crimson blotch.

The bronze gates of the royal seat were wide open, and the Lord of Winterfell steeled himself for a tumultuous stay in the capital as he rode past them.

Author's Endnote:

Oh hey, look, another big chapter - not that I think anyone would be complaining.

Starring: Olenna '*Vaginal Diplomacy is da wae'* Tyrell, Yohn *'We still got 'em rune skills'* Royce and Howland *'I give sound advice'* Reed.

We get to see some politicking, and Ned finally gets to arrive in KL. I wanted to do the whole KL chapter in one go, but Garlan's PoV turned out far longer than expected.

As I wrote this PoV, it occurred to me that a toothless Olenna would have far greater difficulty speaking coherently and clicking with her tongue, but since I'm kinda strapped for any feasible solution, I'll just do what GRRM did - ignore the issue entirely, pretend it's not there. *Shrugs*