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

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

Eddard Stark

He looked at Robb. His son was stocky and strong, with an easy smile and laughing blue eyes. Still a boy, despite already being six and ten and reaching Ned's height. Behind him, Grey Wind was trailing curiously. The direwolf and the boy were inseparable almost everywhere outside the training yard.

By Robb's side stood Theon Greyjoy, another source of unease. As always, Balon Greyjoy's son proudly wore the black velvet doublet embroidered with the golden kraken of his House, and his face was graced by a cocky smile as usual. Ned had allowed the boy the same tutoring his children received and even greater freedom. Yet he could see it. Despite his efforts to turn the boy from a hostage to a foster son, the stigma remained.

In the end, blood was thicker than water, and it shouldn’t have been such a surprise that Theon would have chosen his own birth family, despite Balon’s complete disinterest in his would-be heir. Ned regretted his feeling of mercy for the cowering ten-year boy back then. He should not have offered to take the boy and let Stannis, Robert, or Tywin deal with him. But it was too late; he had taken the ironborn heir in, and returning him to the Iron Isles was not an option now, nor was sending him away.

His gaze moved to his wife, gently speaking to Sansa and Arya in hushed whispers. His younger daughter looked excited, but Sansa had grown pale.

Eddard Stark shook his head and looked carefully at Robb, who fidgeted under his gaze. His son still had much to learn before he could lead the North, let alone wage war. Eddard Stark had no plans of dying anytime soon, but being prepared did not hurt.

“Today you’ll mete out justice, Robb,” he decided as he picked up Ice from Jory and placed it in his son’s stunned hands.

It was time to bloody his boy without the risk of battle. Hunting deers and hares in the Wolfswood was far different from taking a man’s life.

“But-“

“Ours is the old way,” Ned reminded his son, who nodded uneasily after a moment. “Remember your lessons. Let’s go now.”

Catelyn threw him a piercing look from the side but ushered the girls after them. Robb uneasily held the ancestral blade of their House; he was barely taller than Ice. It would have made for an amusing sight if not for the occasion. They headed towards the main gate, accompanied by two scores of guardsmen led by Jory and Walder.

“Jory, can you tell us what happened?” Robb asked hesitantly.

The captain of the guards moved closer and coughed with a heavy frown.

“A merchant from King’s Landing was staying in the Smoking Log. He pulled Barba into his room-“

“Innkeeper Errold’s daughter?” Robb asked, face darkening.

“Aye, her. He pulled her into his room and forced himself on her. When old man Errold heard, he came over to halt them, but the merchant had his two sellsword guards beat him bloody. Hallis Mollen and Harwin were in the Smoking Log and managed to subdue the sellswords and send a runner to the other guardsmen and Winterfell.“

They made the rest of the way to Winter Town in solemn silence, where a small crowd had gathered at the market square, and the wooden stalls were all pulled aside. As they neared, loud cries echoed among the muddy square.

"Release me at once! This is a mistake!" The voice was high-pitch and grating to the ears. Artos and Dylon held a manacled, plump man garbed in a green velvet tunic who was bellowing for all to hear. His bald scalp beaded with sweat despite the chill in the air. "I have friends in court!"

“Friends in court?” Artos snorted.

“Yes, yes,” the merchant nodded vigorously. “Lord Baelish and Commander Slynt-”

“Have nothing to do with the North,” Ned interjected icily.

“Ah, milord,” the plump man’s face twisted in a greasy smile as he turned to him and made a shallow bow. “My name is Dynas. As I was saying, this has been a mistake!”

“A mistake?” Robb echoed coldly.

“Yes, yes,” the merchant bobbed his head like a squirrel. “I paid for the girl’s service, and her father attacked me!”

"LIAR!" The crowd parted to show a furious Helga. Errold's wife had reddened eyes, and her weathered face was twisted in scorn and fury. Trailing after her was a slip of a girl, face bruised and bloody with tears streaming from her swollen eyes, and Ned could see that her dress was torn underneath the cloak. "Me daughter is not even four and ten and no whore, you focken' brigand! Yer thugs crippled my Errold when he tried to stop ya!"

“Oh please, she wanted it, and I was going to compensate her-”

Ned took a careful look at his children. Catelyn was looking at him pleadingly, Arya had gone pale, and Sansa looked ready to faint. Robb had clenched his jaw, and he could see his son grit his teeth while Theon's eyes angrily glared at the merchant.

“RAPER!”

“Vile woman, stop besmirching my good name!”

Robb looked hesitantly at him, but Ned remained impassive and lightly shrugged his shoulders. The Lord of Winterfell wanted to see how his son would do. Clearly, the man was a raper, one used to getting away with it. Would Robb geld him? Would he behead him or offer him to take the Black?

His heir looked at the beaten girl, and his hesitation was slowly replaced with an icy resolve.

“Silence!” The squabbling immediately ceased at Robb’s cry. He then looked to Artos and Dylon. “Bring him to the block.”

The plump man's greasy smile was briefly replaced with shock before it turned into disbelief.

"This is a mistake; we could still resolve this peacefully. It's just a peasant girl's maidenhead," Dynas cried out as the pair of guardsmen placed him over an oaken stump and held him down. "The whore wanted it, and I was going to pay!”

“Any last words?” Robb asked as he slowly unsheathed Ice.

The dark, smoky ripples shone in the middling sun as his son carefully made a few practice swings to the side.

The plump merchant struggled for a few moments but couldn’t budge the strong arms of Artos and Dylon.

“My friends shall hear of this!” Dynas angrily vowed. “I demand a trial by battle!”

“A poor choice of last words,” Theon snorted with amusement from the side. “I don’t think the man has ever swung a sword in his life.”

“You’re neither knight nor noble to demand such,” Robb said.

"Wait," Dynas' desperate voice echoed in the square. "I shall take the Black!"

For a short moment, Robb paused, but his eyes were steeled with resolve.

“In the name of Robert of House Baratheon, the First of His Name, King of the Seven Kingdoms and Lord Protector of the Realm, by the word of Robb of House Stark, I do sentence you to die.” The Valyrian Steel greatsword rose in the air, and the plump man began struggling frantically but to no avail. Artos and Dylan’s hands were like two pairs of iron pincers, holding the merchant down effortlessly.

The blade descended with a single motion, and Dynas’ head rolled on the ground, leaving a bloody trail on the mud. Ned nodded with approval at his son; it was a clean cut. Soft cheers and grunts of approval were heard from the crowd.

“The Night’s Watch has no need for peddlers,” Robb coldly stated, face pale but stoic, but Ned could see a slight tremble in his hand. “Put his head on a spike at the main gate for all to see and bring his two thugs here.”

Lew grabbed the head and headed back to the gate while Walder went to fetch the imprisoned sellswords, and Alyn and Alebelly carried away the headless corpse to be burned.

Ned glanced at his daughters; both looked shaken, and his wife had grown pale. He shook his head inwardly; his children would be coddled no more. Two dark and shaggy men that looked like children next to Walder were dragged over by the enormous guardsman effortlessly.

Robb took a deep, shuddering breath, steeled himself and looked at the manacled men.

"The block or the Black?"

19th Day of the 4th Moon

He watched through the window as a fat rider rode into the courtyard below, followed by two knights and four squires. The man who looked too large to ride on the poor horse wore a sea-green cloak.

“Wylis is here,” Ned said, eliciting a thoughtful nod from Howland. The mermen knight had thankfully answered his summons and arrived prior to the royal party.

The Lord of Winterfell walked back to his desk and sat on his tapered chair as his mind wandered to the previous day's events again.

The merchant was bold to think that simply giving the names of 'Lord Baelish' and 'Commander Slynt' would get him out of trouble. No doubt the man had done something similar before or simply paid his way out of it. The more concerning part was that Baelish was apparently the master of coin, and Janos Slynt was the Commander of the Goldcloaks, both important positions in King's Landing. In the future, Baelish had risen even further, according to Jon, somehow usurping the role of Lord Paramount of the Riverlands and Lord Protector of the Vale. Definitely a man to be wary of.

The plump Southerner had far more coin in his purse than a common merchant would have. Much to Ned's pride, Robb had given ten dragons to Errold and his family, and the other thirty had entered Winterfell's coffers.

What was Robert doing as King if he let outlaws run roughshod over his subjects?! Jon Arryn had taught them better than that…

Ned shook his head and took a sip of dark ale. What happened in King's Landing was Robert's problem, not his.

The sellswords had refused to 'freeze their balls on the Wall'. Despite his fears, Sansa and Arya had not fainted even after the third beheading. It pained to see both of his vibrant daughters so quiet and subdued, but it was a lesson that needed to be learned sooner rather than later. Robb had emptied his stomach when he returned inside the keep but otherwise held up well. With time and experience, he would become a great Lord of Winterfell. Catelyn was wroth with him but attended all the meals and no longer wasted away at the Sept and resumed her duties as a Lady of Winterfell and mother of four.

Once again, a forlorn sigh tore out of his lips, and he emptied his tankard full of ale. Ned wanted to confide in his lady wife badly, but grief and anger did not go hand in hand with reason. When her head cooled down, he would slowly inform her.

"Wylis should be here any moment," Howland's voice broke him out of his musing. "We can get a measure of the King and his family before they arrive."

Ned simply nodded. Making plans solely on Jon's letter would be folly. His warnings were heeded, but Jon had stated that certain things differed from what he remembered. And he was well aware that all plans go awry as soon as the first arrow flew.

"Ser Wylis is here to see you," Walder's voice announced through the door.

"Let him in."

The heir of White Harbour entered, still in his riding clothes and armour. A pale green padded surcoat with a merman emblazoned in the middle graced his cuirass that covered his barrel-like chest, and a sapphire trident brooch clasped his green cloak over his shoulders. Just as he last saw the man two years ago, his head was shaven, and he was chasing his father in girth.

"Lord Stark," Wylis made to bend the knee, but Ned quickly came over and stopped him.

Courtesies were the last thing on his mind right now, and Wyman's son was a heavy, stout man; if he could not get back up on his own, Ned and Howland would struggle greatly to get him back on his feet.

"No need for this now, Wylis," Ned greeted warmly and returned to his chair. "Come, take a seat."

“Lord Reed,” the fat knight greeted as he sat down.

“Ser Wylis,” the crannoglord returned serenely. “How was your travel?”

"A bit muddy because of the light snow, but otherwise good," the merman knight jovially said from underneath his brown walrus moustache before looking covetously at one of the pitchers of wine on the oaken desk. "My throat is parched; I hope you don't mind-"

“Oh no, feel free,” Ned nodded, lamenting his decision to dismiss the servant earlier. Wylis happily filled a goblet with wine and took a generous gulp. “How fares the king?”

“His Grace has seemed to… let go of himself,” the fat knight carefully supplied.

“Walder, guard the stairway,” Ned raised his voice.

"Yes, my lord," Walder's reply was barely heard through the door, and his heavy footsteps dwindled further and further away.

"It's been nearly two hundred and fifty years since a royal presence has graced the halls of Winterfell. Speak freely, Ser Wylis; I want to know what to expect when the royal party arrives," Ned ordered.

The merman heir fiddled with his moustache for a few moments before sighing.

“The king seems to have gained at least eight stone since the Greyjoy Rebellion and has lost interest in everything but feasting, drinking, and whoring,” Wylis slowly reported, eliciting a grimace from Ned. “He cares little for the Queen and shames her in public by groping serving wenches in full view of the court.”

Ned couldn’t help but shake his head. He knew his friend did not have a good marriage, but this…

"How are the queen and the royal children like?"

"Cersei Lannister looked like a lioness whose tail had been pulled," the merman heir reported with a chuckle. "The children take after their mother in looks. The crown prince seems gallant and courteous at first glance but has a bad temper with a penchant for cruelty if provoked. Joffrey had a servant nearly flogged to death for serving him the wrong wine. I am unsure whether the crown prince knew the difference or was looking for someone to vent his frustrations on."

What was Robert doing? Could he not be bothered to rear his own heir, at least?! An heir had to be carefully nurtured, let alone a Crown Prince!

But no, his friend seemed to be too busy feasting to care. Ned could easily see how he could have lost his head under a person like this. A small sigh tore out of his mouth, and he focused on the matter at hand.

“What about Princess Myrcella and Prince Tommen?”

"The Princess is as beautiful as her mother, if not even more," Wylis said after a generous gulp of wine. "Polite, courteous, and sharp of wit, she seems to be the new Realm's Delight with none of the cruelty. The youngest prince is but a small and shy plump boy with a penchant for reading. "

“When do you think the King’s party will arrive?” Howland curiously asked from the side.

“Well, they made seven leagues on the first day when I travelled with them,” Wylis recounted as he rubbed his meaty chin before emptying the remains of the goblet in one go. “If the gods are gracious and the weather is good, they will arrive within a fortnight.”

“Thank you, Ser Wylis,” Ned nodded gratefully. “I’ve arranged for some of the best quarters in the Guest House for you.”

Barring the ones meant for the royal family, that was.

The knight stood up, gave another deep bow, and left the solar, leaving the Lord of Winterfell alone with Howland.

“This means little, you know,” the Lord of Greywater Watch said.

“You heard him. All of Cersei’s children take after her,” Ned countered.

“Aye, I did hear. And four of yours look like Cat. Both of mine take after Jyanna in looks,” Howland explained. “Jon also takes after his mother. What I mean to say is looks are flimsy proof of anything. You know Stannis would be the sole beneficiary if it were true. Why did he not bring it up to his royal brother? Why wait after Robert died and you were executed?”

“What about the crown prince’s cruelty?”

“Was not Robert cruel that day? Laughing at the desecrated corpses of a babe of two and a pregnant woman?” Howland shook his head. “The lion is also cruel. Joffrey is Tywin’s grandson, after all. And there are bad fruits on every tree, Ned. Neither the Reeds nor the Starks were lacking in cruel butchers who revelled in senseless acts of violence.”

His friend did have a point. All they had were a few words written in blood, and Jon himself had stated that he was not privy to the Southron plots, just what he had eventually reached him at the Wall.

“Aye, I guess you’re right,” Ned sighed.

Howland ran a hand through his hair, and his face twisted grimly.

“There’s something worse, though. It doesn’t really matter if the royal children are Robert’s or not.”

"What do you mean, if the Queen had cuckolded the king, it would be…."

“War, yes. But what if the children simply take after their mother, as happens quite oft, and people are simply fanning the flames of conflict, intent to force House Stark to make the first move and take all the scrutiny and blame?” His friend carefully proposed, making Ned pale. “I find it hard to believe that Cersei would give Robert horns for nearly seventeen years, and you would be the first to notice. What about the Master of Whispers, the Kingsguard, the small council, and the other courtiers? What about Robert himself? Are they all blind while you are all-seeing?”

Ned tiredly rubbed his brow and slumped on his chair.

20th Day of the 4th Moon, The Gift

Jon Snow

He opened his eyes, stretched, and looked at the starry sky above. To his left, near the crackling campfire, sounded the snores of Jarod and Duncan. Red Jeyne and Willow were curled right next to him, and Jon could feel Ghost prowling after a hare in the nearby forest. Helicent and Maude were guarding the edges of the camp, together with an earth singer assigned to watch duty.

His plans were the same as always, but his chances of success had increased substantially with a valyrian steel blade at hand. Facing the Others alone with obsidian weapons had always been a risk, but one he was willing to take. And for good or for bad, he was no longer alone now.

He shook his head and got up. To the far east, a slight pink hue formed on the horizon. At least he had not woken up too early today; there was less than half an hour until sunrise.

Aside from Jarod and Duncan, the ground was littered with smaller, childlike figures clustered together and covered by their leafy cloaks.

Fifty-seven singers, the last remnant of the Dawn age, scarcely half of them hunters and warriors. But they were mighty useful companions despite the fact that only Leaf knew the common tongue. They could stay watch during the night, take care of the horses, find edible roots and mushrooms with ease and help cook and were excellent scouts in the forest to boot. The Earth Singers had a very sharp hearing, and together with the dogs, they made for an excellent night watch.

Which meant more sleep and better rest for him, as long as he did not wake up before the crack of dawn, like just now.

A pity only Leaf could speak the common tongue, although a few other singers did understand some of it.

Jon finally found his way to the edge of the camp, where Leaf stood vigil on a rock.

“Hello, Jon Snow,” she greeted with her sad voice.

“Good morning, Leaf,” he returned as he sat on a nearby rock and gazed into the darkness. “How did you cross the Wall?”

“By taking the Bridge of Skulls at night,” she explained.

In hindsight, that wasn’t that big of a surprise. The Watch was stretched thin for men, and they had abandoned all but three castles for a reason. Westwatch had scant patrols from the Shadow Tower at best.

"Can you cross it again and meet us North of the Wall?"

“We’d have to trek through parts of the Frostfangs and cross the Milkwater,” Leaf said with a frown. “But I know a few easier crossings up the river. It can be done. Are you not going to cross with us?”

“Nay, passing through the Shadow Tower would be better. I’d rather be allowed passage by Commander Mallister and not have to fight rangers beyond the Wall mistaken me for a wilding. But I don’t think the Old Eagle or the other black brothers can stomach seeing you singers.”

“Indeed, humans are quick to attack us on sight,” she agreed softly. “I am surprised someone like you agreed to let us join you.”

“Like me?”

“One not blessed with the greensight,” she explained. “Greenseers have an affinity with us. Powerful, yet bound to the weirwoods lest they wanted to waste away quickly, and the earth singers gathered around them for guidance and protection.”

“Turning you away did enter my mind,” he admitted. “Yet I cannot afford to refuse any aid, especially one as genuine as yours. What would you have done if I had declined?”

“Wander, looking for another hidden alcove while our numbers dwindle into oblivion,” Leaf mumbled.

Sadness, acceptance, and peace radiated from her voice and her body. Jon looked upon the being of legend and couldn’t help but sigh. The Singers of the Earth had long accepted their fate and, after millennia, had little strength left to fight it.

Could he have so graciously accepted defeat?

Jon Snow found himself chuckling ruefully. No, he would fight to his last breath, he always did, and he always would. He couldn't help but marvel at greenseers' power over the earth singers. Even with the last of them dead, they followed his words religiously.

“Can you tell me more about this three-eyed crow?” He found himself asking.

“He was once a man called Brynden Rivers-”

“Bloodraven?”

“Yes, the very same,” Leaf bobbed her head as Jon stared at her incredulously.

“But how could he live for so long? He’d be more than a hundred and twenty years old!”

“In human years, yes,” she agreed. “But greenseers always live far longer when wed to the weirwoods.”

Was Brynden Rivers passing him Dark Sister as one bastard of House Targaryen to another? Not that he’d complain.

Yet a frown found its way to his face as he looked at the gilded guard with the red ruby on his belt. It was too gaudy, too eye catchy, but Jon couldn’t reliably get a trusty blacksmith to change it for him unless he turned back to Little Hall, which would waste nearly a fortnight. He was not afraid of the wildlings but possibly brothers of the Night’s Watch recognising or coveting the famed sword. He was no longer the Lord Commander’s steward, just a stranger from nowhere. And Jon honestly cared little about the connection with House Targaryen.

Long gone were the days when the dragons were men of greatness, and Maester Aemon was but a dwindling echo of times forgotten. By his memory, Daenerys and someone calling himself Aegon were too busy fighting against each other and the Tyrells over who would hold the Iron Throne, ignoring any of his pleas for aid. All of his efforts to catch a wight had been in vain, as it was quickly dismissed. Supposedly necromancy was practised before in Westeros, and some practitioners still existed in the far corners of Essos to this day, so a moving corpse was flimsy proof of anything.

“Why the long face?” Leaf asked curiously. “Does the sword offend you?”

“Nay, only the hilt,” he shook his head with a sigh. “Too conspicuous.”

“I can change it if you wish,” she offered.

Jon held back the scoff on his lips and curiously gazed at Leaf.

She was sincere.

“How? Are you well-versed in the art of smithing as well?”

“No, but we can use the *true tongue* to shape wood with the song,” Leaf carefully offered.

“I thought you could not do magic?”

"It is not magic, but the power of the true tongue itself. It would require seven of us to sing together and sacrifice a few drops of blood to stir the trees."

Jon squinted his eyes. That still sounded like magic, but it seemed mighty useful.

“Do it,” he finally agreed. He’d rather try this than risk showing a Valyrian Steel blade to the blacksmith at the Shadow Tower.

Denys Mallister, the Shadow Tower

Denys Mallister was old. Nearing seventy years, he was still grateful to have all of his teeth and to be able to move. His choice to swear his life to the Night’s Watch after his father passed away was spontaneous but not something he would ever regret. He did not stand to inherit anything and could only become a hedge knight or a master-at-arms as the fifth son. After a year of aimless wandering around the tourneys of the realm, he had decided to try his luck with the ancient order at the Wall instead. Denys had been hesitant at first, but the work had been fulfilling, albeit harsh. As the years flew by, the Shadow Tower had become his home, and the Black Brothers - his family.

Yet things had grown troublesome lately. More missing rangers than ever, more deserters, and even fewer recruits than usual.

He looked at the three Northmen before him, all armed and armoured to the teeth. This was the oddest trio Denys Mallister had seen by far, and he had seen a lot of strange things in his seventy years of life.

A large, hulking man, body brimming with strength, wearing the three pinecones on white and green, the sigil of House Liddle. A tall yet wiry greybeard, no less dangerous, wearing the same heraldry but in reversed colours.

A bastard.

And the oddest sight was the young man who was in charge. Not only did a white direwolf head grace the dark-grey surcoat, but a living snow-white adolescent direwolf reaching the man's waist trotted calmly behind him, followed by four large and vicious hunting hounds. They were all suspiciously well-behaved, and if this were on the other side of the Wall, Denys would claim the man was a warg. He looked shy of six feet tall and green as summer grass, but once the Commander of the Shadow Tower looked closer, his eyes and posture spoke differently.

His gait was filled with confidence, one borne of experience, not arrogance. His dark grey eyes were sharp and heavy; Denys Mallister couldn't help but feel that he was dangerous.

Very dangerous.

After decades of experience, the Commander of the Shadow Tower trusted his gut feeling, as it had saved his skin more than a dozen times.

But the most peculiar thing was not the dangerous dark sword that had an odd yet intricate ironwood lining that somehow merged into the steel guard, nor the pale pommel the shape of a direwolf head that looked to be seamlessly carved out of weirwood, but his looks.

The boy, nay, the man, looked like Lord Rickard Stark come again.

The same dark hair, the same long face, and the same hard, steely eyes reminded Denys Mallister of the former Lord of Winterfell, albeit far younger and prettier but no less dangerous. Despite the odd direwolf sigil, this could only be Jon Snow, Rickard's grandson.

"I take it you aren't here to join the Watch?" He asked reluctantly.

Denys direly needed men of their calibre as few worth their salt joined the Black Brothers on their own nowadays, and he had to make do with outlaw dregs or green boys lured in by the recruiters with false promises.

"Nay, Commander Mallister," the young man said and bowed respectfully. "I am Jon Snow, and these are my companions, Duncan Liddle," the boulder-like man nodded politely, then Rickard's grandson gestured towards the greybeard, "and his grand-uncle Jarod Snow. We seek passage further north."

"What business would you have Beyond the Wall?" Denys grunted.

"We're seeking to find the sword Dark Sister," Jon Snow provided simply.

"This is a folly," he sighed. "Many a ranger had sought the famed blade after Bloodraven disappeared, but none were successful. All the parties sent by the Mad King returned with empty hands or not at all. It's probably buried under the snow or forgotten in a dark cave somewhere."

"I am aware of the difficulty, commander," Rickard's grandson evenly said.

"You can join the Watch; once you become rangers, you can venture beyond the Wall freely," Denys Mallister attempted to dissuade them once more.

"I'm afraid we'll have to decline." Jon Snow's steely eyes had not wavered for even a second. "Neither of us is ready to swear off women or our Houses."

If it were any other making a request to pass, he would simply send them off. But House Stark had supported the Wall for eight thousand years, and the Liddles themselves sent supplies every year and oft joined the order. And bastard or not, the young man before him was considered valued enough to be raised together with his trueborn siblings in the ancient halls of Winterfell all the same.

"Alas, I tried," the Commander of the Shadow Tower lamented with a regretful sigh. "I shall let you pass, but I'm afraid I cannot provide you with any aid as we're already stretched thin. You'd be completely on your own."

Jon Snow nodded as if he had never expected otherwise.

Author's Endnote:

Ned’s preparation takes a whole different dimension as time passes. We see another person with many friends at court. But his friends at court seem to be of little help outside of King’s Landing. Littlefinger has many friends in many places. But not all of them are good.

None of Mance Rayder's plans were going to have a good ending, and Jon is well aware of this fact. It's good that he has a daring plan of his own.

It always felt that the accusation of Cersei's children being bastards was flimsy without her confession (especially without the book about lineages, which isn't too solid proof on its own). Howland is trying to be a voice of reason.

The COTF unveil some minor not-magic (or so they claim) related to trees (gee, what a surprise!?), but that’s the last of their bag of tricks without a greenseer.