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.

11th Day of the 9th Moon

The Onion Knight

The lord's room was as bare as before, save for the two chairs and the study desk strewn with parchment, where he conducted Shireen's lessons.

"Davos," Stannis let out a feeble, raspy cough from his bed. "The lessons are taking too much from me. The poppy is wearing off again."

"The air in Driftmark is easier on your lungs, according to Cressen, m'lord."

"I will not die-" if the wet, sickly cough made the smuggler worry, the dark blood splattering on the sheets made his insides churn, "in some other man's keep! When I perish, Shireen will be surrounded by leal men sworn first to me and then to her."

Stannis wiped the small streams of blood leaking from his lips with a napkin. While his throat had somewhat healed, allowing him to speak more freely, his lungs had only gone worse, and every breath he took sounded like a painful wheeze, which had become harsher since their return to Dragonstone.

Tired, Davos rubbed his brows to cover up his grimace. "Does she still not know?"

"Nay." The Baratheon's voice was hoarse yet as hard as steel. The months of constant pain had only hardened Stannis' resolve. His muscles and what little fat he had were almost fully melted, leaving only bones and skin as pale as milk, yet the stormy blue eyes were more alive than ever. "A father must never show weakness to his daughter. I… I know I have never been a good father, but I owe Shireen some joy before I go."

Another bout of coughing sent blood over the sheets again, and Stannis didn't even bother wiping away the blood from his lips.

Everything the man did was now for his daughter. Despite his dislike, Stannis gingerly took the milk of the poppy for his lessons with Shireen so he could stand up, walk, sit, and talk without too much pain. The charred skin on his legs never fully healed, and parts of it had to be cut out to prevent festering. Now, even his appearance before the fleet's captains was reduced to twice a week for half an hour, yet the tutoring of his daughter went for hours every day. Worse, while milk of the poppy dulled the pain, the agony returned a hundredfold afterwards, and the injured lungs were only further aggravated. Cressen

had warned him that doing such things too much would only hasten his demise, yet Stannis had vehemently refused to reduce his time with his daughter.

Shireen knew her father was not in good health, but the poor lass had no idea he was not only ill but dying. Yet, Stannis was stubborn, just like he could be on this - Davos only prayed his death would not break the young girl's newfound spirit.

Shaking his head, the onion knight focused on the present and passed over Lord Velaryon's request, making the bedridden man laugh hoarsely, sending splatters of blood over the covers again.

"Robert always considered Stark more of a -" another bout of bitter, harsh hacking interrupted the lord's words, "more of a brother than Renly or me. Velaryon is too ambitious, but keeping the royal fleet with me gone would be putting a sword to Shireen's neck."

"Yet all the shipwrights in this part of the Narrow Sea are hard at work," Davos observed.

Stannis shook his head feebly. "Three or so dozens of ships amidst three houses is not much. But just enough so Shireen isn't powerless."

Most of the materials were taken from the royal fleet's reserves. Neither Dragonstone, Driftmark, nor Claw Isle could afford the materials or the experienced shipwrights, also hailing from King's Landing and the royal shipyards.

"Perhaps we should send an envoy with a letter directly to His Grace, at least warning him of the Lannister duplicity?"

The wet, wheezing laugh that rumbled out of Stannis' chest turned into a jarring cough, sending more blood over his covers. "And implicate Shireen? Stark's already in bed with the Lannisters with his heir married to the lioness' get." Stannis shook his head and wiped the blood from his lips; the white handkerchief was now damp with crimson. "Does the young Monterys get on with my daughter?"

Davos couldn't help but grimace. "He's still fearful."

"Alas, I had hoped…" He choked with a bloody cough again. "My daughter will do her duty. But… I had hoped Shireen would find more joy in life than I. What should I do, Davos?"

In the end, Stannis was contemplating a betrothal between his daughter and the younger Velaryon heir, uniting Dragonstone and Driftmark in the next generation. Such a move would also cement Monford's loyalty in blood.

"There's still time, and both of them are young," the smuggler said, uncomfortable. Yet Monterys was too skittish around Shireen, who was four years his senior. Davos felt she didn't like the young Velaryon heir much either but was still amiable, if somewhat distant, towards the boy. "Is there truly a need to rush for such an arrangement?"

Promising the hand of your young children was still an odd concept for him. His eldest, Dale, just got married to a merchant's daughter at four and twenty, just like Davos had. Although Marya's father was a baker, the then-young smuggler had to fight tooth and nail to get her old man's approval.

“You are right,” the bedridden lord wheezed out. “I ought to let my daughter decide for herself-” he started coughing even more deeply than before and drowned out whatever he wanted to say.

This had happened before, and the episodes seemed to worsen by the sennight - Davos could do nothing but call Maester Cressen.

13th Day of the 9th Moon

The Lord of Winterfell

Nine days later, Howland still had nothing on the assassin. Three secret passages were found in the Hand’s Tower, leading into a complex underground system of tunnels. A day of exploration had even Howland lost down there, so Ned had decided he did not need the headache or the inherent danger of slithering around in the dark like some rogue, so he had his men seal all three secret entrances.

For once, the courtly rumours worked in his favour - the news of the poisoning had turned into a case of stomach ache and badly cooked bacon, and nobody seemed to suspect anything malicious.

Regardless, the Lord of Winterfell found himself far more cautious now. There were always three heavily armed Stark men-at-arms within a hand's reach of him, or at least Winter. No food, water, or wine touched his or Tommen’s lips before going past Calon and the direwolf’s sharp nose.

The Lannister siblings did not seem to have made much progress either. It was an alliance of necessity - Ned liked them little, but at least their interests seemed to align, and he could trust them enough not to try to kill him or Tommen. More than the other courtiers, at least.

"Neither I nor Jaime managed to find anything. On the other hand, my royal sister replaced half the servants and thinks Renly is acting suspicious," Tyrion said with some amusement. It was far easier to meet Tywin's youngest without raising much attention since he became the new master of coin.

They had met in the Hand's audience chamber to supposedly discuss the goings of the Tourney and the repayment of the crown's debt.

“One councillor died on the streets like some dog,” Ned reminded tiredly. “Everyone is cautious, skittish, or both.” Littlefinger’s murder came like lightning out of the blue, leaving him flat-footed. While he misliked the man, perishing like some nameless gutter rat was not a fate he would wish for any of his peers.

“Alas, you decided to saddle me with his heavy burden,” Tyrion groaned, rubbing his mismatched eyes. But despite his complaints, Ned felt the dwarf was relishing the challenge. “What ought to be done with Littlefinger’s assets?”

“Did he not leave a last testament?”

“If he did, I have failed to find it. The poor man probably did not expect to find himself a head shorter in the middle of the streets. Who would have thought saving coin on guardsmen would be so costly?” The dwarf tutted with glee, which quickly disappeared under Ned’s stern glare. It was not proper to mock the dead. “Well, Drearfort returns under the care of House Arryn, but all the inns, warehouses, and brothels acquired under his tenure as a master of coin are another matter altogether.”

“I suppose you have some ideas?” The Northern lord asked with a sigh. Unlike Tyrion, whorehouses were the last worry on Ned’s mind. The Watch’s reforms were on the verge of being finished, and the Tourney was going to start in a scant few days.

“The crown can either auction all those establishments for a quick coin or keep them for a steady revenue.”

“You can’t mean to have the Iron Throne run brothels?!”

His outrage only amused Tyrion, who chuckled. "Why not, Lord Stark? Gold is gold, and the royal coffers are in dreadful need of assistance. Littlefinger did not manage the whorehouses by himself - he had a madame in charge of each. Now, they shall pay the earnings to the crown instead of the unlamented Lord Baelish." And he generously filled his cup with wine from the pitcher. Even that one was bought randomly from some merchant by Vayon and tested by Calon to prevent any possible mishaps.

Ned rubbed his eyes tiredly - Tyrion was making a good point. He had no strength left to tackle the financial troubles facing the Iron Throne, nor was there a need to; it was the job of the master of coin to deal with such. In the end, he wasn't planning to stay here for too long. The Lord of Winterfell had already trusted the youngest Lannister sibling enough to push him into the post, so what was a little more?

“Do as you see fit,” he said, making Tyrion choke on his wine. Reaching across the table, Ned smacked his back to help with the coughing, receiving a surprised yet grateful nod. “But it will be up to you to manage those madames and ensure they aren’t short-changing the crown.” Gods, the words made him feel dirty, but the whole city and the blistering heat already did that aplenty. Ned waited until he received another nod from the dwarf, “I hope there are no other troubles with your new post?”

“Surprisingly little. Although the High Septon has approached me to inquire about the crown’s plans to repay the debt to the Faith.”

Yet another one trying to call their dues at such an inconvenient moment. While the fat priest seemed to have let the grudge go publicly, he appeared to be dead set on making as much trouble as possible for him, doubtlessly inspired by the Tyroshi envoy. Some days Ned felt like the post of Hand was akin to a piece of meat, with every single viper in this damn sweltering den lusting for a bite. Robert's indifference helped little, but at least he was not alone. Hundreds of leal Northmen were in the city, and his alliance with the Lannister siblings gave him a sense of security despite his dislike.

“The Faith can wait,” Ned groused. “The Seven-Pointed Star claims patience is a virtue, does it not?”

Tyrion took a generous mouthful of wine and closed his eyes in contentment. “Indeed. But I thought you Northerners followed the Old Gods?”

“Most of us do. But I know a thing or two from my fostering in the Vale due to a stubborn Septon thinking he could save me from my *heathen ways*.” A fond smile came to his face at the memory - he missed that simpler time when his only woe was a persistent priest extolling the virtues of the Seven. Even Tyrion let out an amused huff.

“A single look at our pious High Septon would convince even the biggest unbeliever of the seven virtues,” the dwarf said sarcastically before his mismatched eyes lost their cheer, turning sombre. “The Tyroshi envoy keeps pestering me to pass on a message to you, my lord Hand. Something about your steward sending him away.”

"I would not sell my son to some slaver, no matter how hard this fool badgers me," Ned gritted his teeth. Just mentioning the Essosi's demands filled his blood with cold fury. Even Winter stirred from his rug by the empty hearth and padded over quietly, laying down by his feet.

Tyrion shrugged and took a cautious sip from his goblet, “There must have been some misunderstanding when Littlefinger conveyed his offer, it seems.”

“Oh?”

“The offer for marriage is very generous and open-ended, and so are the terms of your son’s stature, even more so that he’s now to be a lord. It seems Magister Zaphon Sarrios desires an alliance and is willing to put in quite the effort.”

All Ned could do was shake his head at the words. Had Littlefinger deceived them at that last council meeting? Or had the envoy changed his terms after hearing of Jon’s ennoblement?

Why did neither possibility surprise him…

“All these talks are moot without Jon here,” Ned deflated. He just hoped his boy was still safe, experience or not. “We have more pressing issues to discuss than some greedy Essosi Magisters.”

“That is true. Let us speak more of the terms of enlistment and rewards that would pull the most able-bodied men towards the new Watch-”

Warg’s Hold, Jon Snow

Some days, Jon felt adrift - as if he was lost, without a direction. He had done everything possible, and a few things thought impossible to bring the fight to the Others. Sure, it was far more successful than the previous time, and the wildlings were beginning to fight back, even after scattering through the far North. His own… tribe? Bannermen? Force? Clan? Vassals? In a true free folk fashion, neither felt genuinely fitting.

Regardless, Jon had a feeling of trepidation. He was no fool - what he was doing here could easily have far-reaching consequences if they managed to survive the onslaught of the Cold Shadows. Never before had the wildlings managed to unite in an actual cohesive, organised force under a single man. Hardhome, the previous wildlings kings - they were all a loose, desperate alliance that had broken apart at the first difficulty like an egg against a rock.

Warg's Hill, on the other hand, had given many of them a taste of discipline, of unity, of valuable tactical experience - things wildlings sorely lacked. All those who disliked such things had either left the budding town or died in the nightly expeditions, leaving only the hardened veterans able and willing to adapt behind. There was no telling how such a thing would play out, but Jon wasn't deluded enough to think there would be no consequences.

Especially with him leading this endeavour.

Was staying here and doing all of… *this* the right move?

No, the course was already set, and the time for doubts had passed. He shook his head, banishing away the errant thoughts - all meaningless assumptions if they failed to survive the Others.

"Another night with no fighting," Jon sighed as he rode Shadow through the gates, Val and Ghost on each side and the warband trailing behind in a loose line. The other groups that had gone out at night were also met with no foes in the dark.

His wife snorted. "You talk as if you want to fight the Cold Ones." The last few weeks had seen the spearwife finally tire, getting exhausted far more quickly than before. But despite his insistence on getting some rest, Val stubbornly tried to keep up with his pace with dogged determination.

Another nightly raid with no sight of any wights or Others - just like for the last moon. A joyous mood seems to have taken the bustling town - the sombre caution had slowly melted with warm weather and the lack of fighting. Some of the chieftains were happy, claiming the Others were defeated for good or had fled back into the Lands of Always Winter like cowardly curs. Thankfully, such foolish ideas were scant, unlike those who had begun to think of the icy foes as a dangerous annoyance at best.

The warm weather also made the surroundings flourish with lushness like never before, breathing life into the Haunted Forest.

However, Jon knew better - no summer lasted forever, and the Others were not so easily bested. A hundred Cold Ones slain was barely a part of what he had struggled against in his previous life.

Winter is coming.

"Aye, it's easier to fight a foe that you know on your terms. The Cold Shadows are not so easily vanquished; their absence means they have found easier targets or are considering other ways of attack."

His words made Val's gorgeous face twist in a grimace. This had been said to some chieftains and lesser leaders, but the days of peace and warmth seemed to slowly crumble their resolve to fight. Or some more foolish ones proposed venturing into the Land of Always Winter to try and hunt the Cold Gods…

All the more true, as Mag the Mighty requested a private meeting. The giants had always been content to do their own thing, and usually, Jon had to be the one to approach them with requests and tasks. Half an hour later, his raiders had disbanded, and Jon was in the small grove, facing the greying giant, only observed by a few dozen direwolves.

“We have to venture further and further every day to feed our mammoths,” Mag the Mighty’s guttural voice rumbled in the old tongue. *“Some are refusing to eat bark any longer.”*

That was troublesome - a mammoth could eat over twenty stone of vegetation per day, and there was only so much grass, roots, shrubbery, and herbs to go around for over a hundred mammoths. The woolly behemoths ate the smaller vegetation faster than it could regrow, even with the warmer weather. Bark was far more abundant, but it was not the beasts' food of choice. If the mammoths refused to consume it…

“Would a bridge to the other bank of the Milkwater help?” The Old Tongue was coarse and harsh on the ears but something Jon had learned by necessity long ago. Truth be told, even this proposition was far-fetched - the other side was the outskirts of the Frostfangs, making it far more hilly, and the trees were far scarcer.

“Mayhaps. But five families want to leave back for the Thenn Valley with their mammoths.”

“They are free to leave.” So, the mammoths' lack of sustenance was just an excuse. But having some leaving would alleviate further trouble down the road. Food was a scarce resource Beyond the Wall.

Jon could bar those who desired to leave, but it would only create more woe. While giants had been helpful so far, it was more in construction, digging, and logging than anything else. Their poor vision and lack of agility made them unsuitable for his method of fighting the Others, especially in the dark. Not that he had not tried - but nearly a dozen men had been trampled in that particular battle, and the shield line had been broken with their fumbling, increasing the casualties even further.

And now that most of the construction and clearing efforts were complete, their presence wasn’t as much of a boon as before.

15th Day of the 9th Moon

The Great Hall was crude but large enough to seat nearly two hundred men at the rough-hewn trestle tables. In fact, one could mistake the wildlings for a more civilised folk, as the leaders and chieftains had gathered around the high table. Jon was sitting at the head seat, Val to his left, with the other spearwives, Styr, Tormund and the rest to his right.

The spacious room had eight hearths, half of which were crackling with a ruddy fire.

“My warband got attacked last night,” Blind Doss spoke up, grabbing the attention of everyone.

“You look no worse for wear,” Devyn Sealskinner observed.

“Aye, none of mine died. ‘Twas only three wights.”

The words made everyone sombre, and any trace of cheer was gone.

“They are adapting,” Jon said. “Looking for easy targets or testing the defences. Tormund?”

“Word has it, Harle n’ his men have moved towards Hardhome,” Giantsbane said, spitting a bone after devouring a roasted fish. “It’s getting hard to track what happens to the other tribes and clans when they’re so far apart, but I haven’t heard o’ any attacks.”

With Redbeard at the mouth of the Antler River and Isryn going for the valley of the Thenns, most of Mance Rayder's army was now scattered across the Haunted Forest in groups big and small. But Jon's purpose had been achieved - while some died to the Others, they went down fighting.

All those tribes and clans gathered around the known obsidian deposits or searched for new ones.

“That means little,” Soren Shieldbreaker leaned forward. “Could be that some clan got attacked, and none was close enough to even notice they’re all dead.”

Morna White Mask shuffled with unease. “Lerna and her ilk are moving down the Milkwater from the Giant’s fist.”

“She has grown daring to approach Warg's Fist,” Styr said gruffly. “She took Lorn as a husband too, along with his tribe.”

This was now the sixth husband the cannibal spearwife had taken, along with their clans and tribes. All those who opposed her were slaughtered and eaten. Such savagery was not a surprise; consuming human flesh was one of the less barbaric things commonly practised Beyond the Wall.

“I knew her old man, har. He barely had any wits to go by.” Tormund burped and patted his bulging belly with satisfaction. “The lass will bite off more than she can chew, sooner or later, har!”

“Morna, send some hunters to keep an eye on Lerna and her movements,” Jon ordered, and the masked spearwife nodded gravely.

All the meetings were much the same - nothing truly happened, and the Others had seemingly gone quiet. But at least those three wights reminded the chieftains of the looming death and darkness.

Things were deceptively calm now, but Jon had a looming feeling that a storm was approaching. Alas, there was not much he could do but wait and prepare. With the outer walls built and things organised, most of his days were spent mediating disputes, spars, and drilling.

But alas, nobody around could challenge him with a blade, and Jon found himself missing crossing swords with the Others. The harsh, keening cry when Valyrian Steel met their icy blades lit a fire in his veins and made him feel more alive than anything else.

As the sun hid behind the Frostfangs, Jon made his way to the grove that served as a Godswood. Every evening, Val would sit there on the bench, usually busying herself with something while waiting for him. The devotion not only made him feel warm, but Val’s presence always soothed his weary mind and helped him to loosen up - be it sparring, fucking, bathing together or just talking where she would offer her support and insight into any things he could have missed.

It was everything Jon did not even know he wanted from marriage.

Yet, for the first time, Val was not waiting for him.

“Where’s my wife?” Jon turned to Brightspot, the dark-furred Singer well-versed in healing and herbal remedies.

"Sister," she pointed with her hand toward Dalla's home. The words were queer and songlike but easy enough to understand. Some of the Singers had started speaking the common tongue, or at least a handful of words, but it was a slow thing. According to Leaf, their mouths were not made to produce the same sounds humans could, and it took a lot of time and effort to do so.

Dalla was easy to find - her home was a sizeable house built from crude logs. In hindsight, he could feel Ghost and half a dozen direwolves in that direction, and Val never remained without a shaggy retinue lately. Duncan and Jarod had made most of the house, and the young woods witch also used the common room downstairs for healing the wounded and the sick.

Just as he arrived, he could feel a cold dampness dance on his hair. Craning his neck to look up, Jon stilled as he noticed a snowflake dancing under the feeble wind. Another one followed, and before he could blink, the air was alive with snow, making him snort.

Winter is coming.

Shaking his head, Jon lifted the bearskin that covered the entrance and entered.

The insides were as crude and bare as expected, with scant few furnishings.

Val was sitting on a chair while Dalla fretted over her, making his insides twist into a knot with worry. Direwolves had lazily sprawled themselves over the floor like a colourful carpet of grey, brown, and black, with Ghost’s enormous form looking more like a snow bear despite being curled just near Val.

“Is my wife ill?” He slowly approached, trying to get his turbulent emotions under control.

Dalla chuckled while Val glared at her sister. “Nay, not ill. But my stubborn mule of a sister seems to have gotten with child yet insists on playing spearwife still.”

It took a good minute for his stunned mind to process the words spoken, during which his wife was looking at him expectantly. Yet despite the roiling mix of happiness, trepidation, and surprise, all that left his mouth was an “Oh.”

Oberyn Martell

King’s Landing’s chaotic nights were finally stomped out by the new Commander of the Gold Cloaks. Marcher Lords were not to be underestimated, as any Dornishman knew all too well. And Balon Swann seemed to be an exemplary specimen - not even two days after taking up his position, half the captains had been arrested for corruption, bribery, extortion, and even murder and rape.

Riots were quickly dispersed, leaving many bruised and bloodied; lootings and burnings were met with swift retaliation, and worse, now Oberyn could no longer enjoy the illegal naked brawls or drunken horse races.

And while the city's streets had finally been put under order, the rumours indicated the court was filled with turmoil.

“The North sounds like an interesting place to visit,” he murmured thoughtfully.

Ellaria, however, managed to overhear from the bed and groaned. “It snows in the damned summer, Oberyn.”

“We’ve yet to see the Wall or Winterfell, love. I keep hearing the most fascinating tales from that place.”

“It’s hard to have fun when you’re wrapped in many layers of wool and fur,” she pinched the bridge of her nose. “Besides, I wouldn’t call ice men or walking corpses fun. Magic is always dangerous, the ancient things even more so.”

"We'll have all the time in the world to decide after the tourney," Oberyn waved away her concerns. Snow had been a rare sight for him, despite his travels, and now that the thought was stuck in his mind, Oberyn couldn't get it out.

Despite their gruffness, the Northmen held onto the customs of olde, so the Red Viper didn’t think there would be any trouble for him in the North. And if they didn’t seem very worried about old wives’ tales coming back to life, why should Oberyn fret about it?

A knock on the door heralded the arrival of Nymeria.

“Where is your older sister?”

“Fooling around with some pretty boy from the Vale,” she smirked, making him nod approvingly. Finally, Obara could release her pent-up frustration the proper way. “I finally managed to find out.”

Oberyn lifted his wineskin and took a small sip, rolling the bitter liquid around his tongue. “Well then, don’t keep us waiting!”

His daughter took the pitcher on the varnished table and directly took a generous gulp.

“The Mountain is barred by a royal order from entering the melee after killing too many opponents,” Nymeria reported, dark cheeks now reddening.

“A pity, but the joust would have to do,” Oberyn murmured.

Even getting his hands on Lorch would satisfy him at this point. Anything was better than waiting.

“That was far from the most interesting word on the streets, though,” Nymeria took another generous gulp from the pitcher as Oberyn stretched lazily and clasped the belt around his waist. “Some talk problems in Essos between the Red Priests. And the Night’s Watch has secured itself two town charters, it seems.”

Ellaria finally stirred from the silken sheets and stretched like a cat, revealing her sensual curves. “Oh, and what would men who had sworn off marriage and children do with a town, let alone two?”

“Celibate no longer, it seems.” Nymeria looked away in annoyance at the display of his lover. Sadly, his daughter lacked his appreciation for the more sensual beauty of a woman’s body. “The black brothers can now marry, and the service is no longer for life, too!”

"Have you been drinking in the morning, Nym?" Oberyn coughed, looking at his daughter, who was chugging away the cask of wine without a care in the world. The Watch had remained unchanged for millennia, and the order had been the same while the Valyrians had been just a bunch of sheepherders in the Lands of Always Summer.

Nymeria stopped drinking, smacked her lips and glared at him. “I know what I heard!”

Indeed, he knew his daughter well enough, and she was not jesting…

Yet, the words that had come out of her mouth sounded so fantastical that Oberyn struggled to find his words for a good minute. His paramour, however, managed to gather her bearing far quicker.

“Still, I doubt many would desire to spend too long on a literal block of ice, royal endorsement or not,” Ellaria snorted.

“You’d be surprised,” Oberyn murmured numbly, heading for the door. “Many a man are in search of a purpose, but swearing off women does not appeal to them. The Watch might have lost most of its prestige, but it has a storied history. Where did you say this crier was, Nym?”

“I’ve heard one in almost every square. They are hard to miss…”

“Don’t tell me you’re interested in joining the Watch, now?” Elaria stood up, stark naked, and draped herself over him.

“It certainly wouldn’t hurt to hear for myself.” Oberyn pulled her into a deep kiss before disentangling himself from her nimble limbs.

After pulling up his boots and putting his spare daggers within, he left the brothel and walked up to the Silk Square. Everywhere he passed, there was talk of the Watch. Oberyn heard it even before he arrived, and the crowd had clogged the cobbled streets even thicker than usual.

“Hear ye, hear ye!” The crier’s voice rose above the excited chatter. “Let all the people gather ‘round for tidings of great import grace our ears this morn! By the decree of Robert Baratheon, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and King of the Andals, Rhoynar, and the First Men, be it known to all the subjects that the Night’s Watch, that stalwart brotherhood sworn to guard the realms of men, is now endorsed and champion by our beloved sovereign and the Lord Hand. By the order of His Grace and the Lord Hand, Eddard Stark, no longer are the brave men of the Watch required to foreswear women and children upon joining-”

The crier was drowned out by the commotion, as everyone seemed so damn excited all of a sudden. Oberyn couldn't help but feel his own spirits uplifted - change was always interesting if nothing else. Maybe there was some truth to those rumours about dark things stirring beyond the Wall.

Oberyn no longer tried to make his way forward and decided to listen to all those men chatting with excitement instead.

“-I heard after twenty years of service, and you get a nice plot ‘o land.”

“Bah, what use is good land when it’s all covered in snow? Sides, even if you retire on a farm, you can still be levied under Lord Commander’s summons.”

“Ye fool, the Northmen grow crops easily enough. ‘Sides, I’m sick o’ drowning in my sweat ‘n you get to see some fightin’ and kill some savages and icemen.”

“Eryk claims the Commanders still have to swear off women to lead, though.”

“So what? It’s not like a lug like you could ever get elected-”

Anywhere Oberyn went, he could hear the cries shouting themselves hoarse, announcing the overly lengthy decree for all to hear or folk discussing it with excitement.

“The Night’s Watch, that ancient and honourable brotherhood, seeks stalwart men of courage and conviction to join their storied ranks to stand as the shield that guards the realms of men-”

The change was bold and daring, but whoever made it was thorough - Oberyn couldn't find any problems. The best aspects of the Ghiscari iron legions of yore had been borrowed, and with time, the Watch would doubtlessly turn into a well-trained war machine if it managed to recruit the numbers. And the overly generous royal endorsement of the reigning king on such a scale had never happened before.

“Let it be known that all those who join the Watch under the banner of Good King Robert shall receive a blessing of the crown for their service-”

Despite being a drunken lech, Robert’s generosity was well-known far and wide, and the masses loved him. Even more so, with the Iron Throne championing the Watch, many would flock to its black banners, especially with the old vows discarded.

Oberyn found that even the notion of joining the Watch appealed to him somehow. Taking the black still washed away crimes and debts, but the bigger the debt or the worse the crime - the longer one had to serve in the new auxiliary order with the rest of the outlaws.

Author’s Endnote:

Lots of stuff happens. The plots go deep and thick in the viper's nest and are not so easy to uncover. The Tourney is looming on the horizon, and the Night's Watch reform comes like thunder out of the blue sky.