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.

1st Day of the 5th Moon, Winterfell

Robert Baratheon

Finally, his royal children were presented, the introductions concluded, and condolences given.

"Take me down to your crypt, Ned. I would pay my respects."

"We've been riding since dawn; the children are tired and cold and can use some rest and refreshment. Surely the dead can wait?" Cersei asked neutrally, but Robert could tell she was feeling annoyed.

He looked at her, then meaningfully at her brother, and thankfully the Kingslayer led her aside.

Ned, gods bless him, called for a lantern and led him towards the crypt while Catelyn pulled Cersei and the children over to show them their quarters.

The years seemed to have struck his friend badly; Robert could see weary lines on his face, large black circles under his eyes, and grey had begun to sneak into his usually well-kept beard. Not only that, but he noticed Ned was a tad thinner than usual. And far more solemn, something he had never thought possible. Losing a son had hit his friend hard.

One would think the Lord of Winterfell had begun to waste away, but his stride was still powerful, his gait straight, and he effortlessly pushed open the thick ironwood door that barred the entrance to the crypt. He signalled to Selmy to remain at the door. The old knight gave him a disapproving look but knew better than to argue.

"I was thinking we'd never arrive," Robert complained as he followed his friend down the narrow stone steps. "I even had to take a ship to get here; otherwise, you might have seen me only next year!"

"It's only around seventeen hundred miles from King's Landing to Winterfell by road," Ned provided. "You would have been here in four moons at most."

"Bah, the royal procession crawls like a turtle at its fastest, and this was after we got rid of that monstrosity my wife called a wheelhouse!" He snorted and put a hand on the granite wall to steady himself as they descended deeper into the darkness. "The rain and snow didn't help. Snow, Ned!"

"Summer snows are common enough at this time of the year," his friend provided with a rare smile. "I hope they did not trouble you much. They usually melt at the first kiss of the sun."

It was getting colder as they braved the winding steps. Only the soft flickering of the lantern warded away the pitch-black darkness. A lesser man would have been scared.

"The Others take your mild snows," Robert cursed as the air became more frigid. "What will this place be in winter? I shudder to think."

“The winters are hard,” Ned admitted softly but then his voice grew steely. “But the Starks will endure. We always have.”

“You need to come south,” he prodded. “You need a taste of summer before it flees. Shed your thick furs and feel the hot kiss of the sun upon your skin, and taste the bounty of summer - melons, peaches, fireplums, so ripe and sweet, unlike anything you tasted before! Flowers everywhere, the markets bursting with food, the summerwines so cheap and so good that you can get drunk just by breathing the air. Everyone is fat and drunk and rich!”

Robert patted his stomach with a thump and laughed heartily, but his friend remained as joyful as a block of ice.

“Winter is coming,” Ned said ominously, and the king could feel his friend was not in the mood, so he let the topic go for now.

Ned was never big for celebrations, but nearly seventeen years as a Lord of Winterfell seemed to have sucked out what little joy he had before.

They continued to descend in silence, and by the time Ned led him into one of the deeper floors, Robert Baratheon was gasping for breath.

Why did the Starks have to bury themselves so deep into this darkness?!

The shadows danced as they went further into the hallway, past the endless rows of stone pillars where the statues of the long-gone Lords of Winterfell and Kings of Winter sat upon their granite thrones and guarding their own sepulchres.

The Starks of old looked all imposing with their stern, grim, and fearsome faces, with stone direwolves curled at their feet and the traditional iron longsword on their laps, all rusted, and at places, only reddish stains remained.

Robert couldn't help but shiver at the chill, even through his thick cloak, but Ned seemed unbothered by the cold. Ice was said to run through the veins of the Starks along with blood, and right now, the king believed it fully.

They finally stopped at a trio of statues.

“Here,” Ned said as he hooked the oil lantern to the hanger next to the pillar.

Robert fought his urge to ignore everything and gazed further into the darkness. There were no more statues; the flickering light illuminated the empty and unsealed tombs, save for one. The king slowly made his way to the small sepulchre.

“Is this your boy, Ned?” He asked, not unkindly.

“Aye,” his friend said, voice raspy. “He loved to climb and climb the most, and in the end, the climb took him.”

After a short pause, Robert rummaged through the insides of his cloak, took out the forget-me-nots he had Lancel gather, and gently placed them in front of the tomb before turning to Ned and squeezing his shoulder in support.

“My condolences.”

He bowed his head and uttered a silent prayer for Ned’s boy before returning to the trio of statues and the sepulchres behind them.

At the front was the dignified Lord Rickard Stark on his granite throne, iron longsword clasped by his stone grip. To his right stood Brandon, and to his left was Lyanna. Ah, sweet Lyanna, gone before her time. All three taken by the damned dragon’s madness and greed.

Robert Baratheon knelt in front of the statue of his lovely betrothed and silently cursed that silver-haired rapist for the thousandth time. A minute later, he had finished paying his dues, and his knees had begun to protest the cold stone below, so he stood up after a short struggle and looked at the statue of his beloved.

The cold granite had captured Lyanna’s likeness well enough, but it was a dead, colourless thing; it lacked her fire.

"She was more beautiful than that," he said as he gazed upon the stone face. Ah, if only Lyanna had lived, she would have been his rightful Queen and not the angry lioness he had for a wife now. "Ah, damn it, Ned. Did you have to bury her down here in the darkness?"

“She’s a Stark of Winterfell,” was the quiet response. “This is where she belongs.”

“Lyanna should have been on a hill somewhere, under a fruit tree, with the sun and clouds above her and the rain to wash her,” Robert lamented.

“I was with her when she died,” Ned recalled, lost deep in thought. “She wanted to come back home, to rest together with Brandon and Father. I bring her flowers sometimes. Lyanna was… fond of flowers.”

The king gently cupped the stone face and brushed his fingers over it. Alas, it was not meant to be, all because of the damned dragons and their greed! "I kill Rhaegar every night in my dreams. Again and again." Ah, how sweet was the sound of steel caving in and bones crunching as his warhammer struck down the Last Dragon; sweeter than any song, sweeter than the fruits of summer. "But it is not enough! A thousand deaths will still be less than he deserves."

“We should return, Your Grace,” Ned sighed. “Your wife will be waiting.”

“Others take my wife,” Robert muttered sourly and turned his gaze from whence they came. “And if I hear ‘Your Grace’ once more, I’ll have your head on a spike. We are more to each other than that.”

The lantern barely illuminated a dozen yards, and the darkness swallowed the rest of the endless hallway. Gods, the thought of all the stairs on the way up did not sit well with him. Hah, if Lyanna could see him now, she would laugh and weep, the mighty stag, the Demon of the Trident, frightened by a flight of stairs!

“Let’s go,” the king finally decided, Ned unlatched the lantern, and they slowly made their way through the darkness again. They were alone down here amongst the Kings of Winter, undisturbed by the gazes and ears of others. “You must be wondering why I came all the way to Winterfell after so long.”

“For the pleasure of my company, surely,” Ned said lightly, and Robert snorted. “And there is the Wall. You need to see it, Your Grace, to walk along its battlements and talk to those who man it-”

“The Wall has stood for what, eight thousand years? It can stand for a few more without me propping it up,” he waved off. He had more than enough of the cold already without visiting that gigantic block of ice.“I have more pressing concerns. These are difficult times, and I need good men about me. Men like Jon Arryn,” he stopped and turned to face his friend. “Men like you.”

“I am yours to command, Your Grace,” Ned vowed. “Always.”

“I want you at my side again, Ned,” Robert admitted. The memories of them running around the Eyrie and the Vale together were something he still yearned for. Damn the throne; if he had known what it was to be king, he would have fled to Essos on the first ship! But no, they chained him with a crown and a throne, and he foolishly sat on it. “I want you down in King’s Landing, not here at the end of the world where you are of no use to anybody!” He blankly stared at the darkness, remembering the endless drudgery of ruling. “I swear to you, sitting on a throne is a thousand times harder than winning it. You or Jon should have taken it, not me.”

“You had the claim, Robert,” his friend softly objected. “Nobody would have kneeled at an untested Northerner who follows the Old Gods.”

"Untested? Without your planning, our bones would be laid to rest at the Ruby Ford. Or would they name it the Stag's Ford, then? And piss on the claim; we had the victory, and we had the swords!" The King thundered. "If it was about a claim, that dragonspawn would have ruled us, and he could have been as mad as his father or brother," he shook his head. "Nay, the dragons are gone now, and you have saddled me with ruling. Laws are a tedious business, and counting coppers is even worse. And the people… there is no end to them. Always complaining, always petitioning, and there is no end to them, I sit on that damned iron chair until my mind is numb and ass raw. They all want something… and the lies they tell. And my lords and ladies are no better. I am surrounded by flatterers and fools. It can drive the best of men to madness, Ned. Half of them don't care to tell me the truth, and the other half can't find it. There are nights I wish we lost at the trident. Ah, no, not truly, but…"

“I understand,” his friend said softly.

Yes, that’s right. Ned was the only one who always understood him! The brother in all but blood, and even that was taken by that damned Rhaegar!

Robert shook his head, took a few breaths to calm himself down, and nodded with a smile, “You’re the only one, my friend,” he straightened up, “Lord Eddard Stark, I name you Hand of the King!”

Ned dropped to one knee, and the silence stretched for a moment. “Your Grace, I am not worthy of the honour.”

Robert found himself grinning, “If I wanted to honour you, I’d let you retire. No, I am planning to let you run the kingdom and fight the wars while I feast, drink, and wench my way into an early grave!” He slapped his bulging gut. “You know the saying about the king and his Hand?”

“The King dreams, and the Hand builds?”

“A fishmaid I bedded once had a choicer way of saying it. The king eats, she said, and the Hand takes the shit,” he roared with laughter at his own jest, but Ned, still kneeling quietly, did not seem amused; his face had become a carving of ice, similar to the silent disproval from the stone kings of winter. His laugh quickly dwindled when he realised this was not the best way to bring his friend south. “Damn it, Ned, at least humour me with a smile!”

“They say it grows so cold here in winter that a man’s laughter freezes in his throat, choking him to death.” Robert could totally believe it. It was summer here, yet colder than the last winter at King’s Landing. “Perhaps that’s why the Starks have so little humour.”

“Come south, and I’ll teach you how to laugh again,” Robert cajoled. “You put me on this damnable throne; now help me hold it. If Lyanna had lived, we would have been brothers, bound by blood and affection. It’s not too late. You have a daughter, and I have a son. My Joff and your Arya shall join your houses, as Lyanna and I might have once done.”

Ned paled even further, and his face twisted in a grimace.

“She’s too young, only eleven.”

“Old enough for a betrothal. The marriage can wait a few years. Now stand up and say yes, damn you!”

Hesitation shone in the steely grey eyes, and Ned sighed heavily. “It pains me to say it, but Arya is not suitable to be a Queen. Not now, not ever. My daughter is wilder than Lyanna and Brandon together. She’s more likely to slit your son’s throat during the bedding than let him touch her.”

Robert roared out in laughter again at the image, so little Arya not only looked like her aunt but took after her in character! But it was understandable. Truthfully, if Joffrey were not his, he’d not want his daughter wed to him either. Ah, where did he go wrong with that boy? Myrcella and Tommen were so much better.

He shook his head; Robert was ill-made to be a father, let alone king. But it mattered little; he was already one and might as well enjoy it to the fullest!

"Ah, my mistake, Ned. It's understandable that you don't want to part with another child so soon," the king nodded wisely, pleased with his conclusion. Sanda, or what was her name, would not do either. But that was not a problem. "How about my Myrcella for your heir? She's well-mannered, more beautiful than her mother, and with wits to spare! You'll find no better woman for your boy in the Seven Kingdoms. They're even the same age and can wed soon if need be!"

He had inspected Robb Stark very closely earlier. On the cusp of manhood, the boy looked half Tully, half Stark, a powerful figure of a born warrior if he ever saw one, with an easy smile and good courtesies. Robert was never a good parent, but he wanted to do right by his children. And this was a worthy match for his daughter, if there was any!

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure, Your Grace,” Ned sighed with hesitation. “These honours are all unexpected. May I have some time to consider? I need to tell my wife…”

Gods, was his knee not tired yet?

"Yes, yes, tell Catelyn and sleep on it if you must," Robert reached down and effortlessly pulled Ned up to his feet and patted his shoulder. "Just don't keep me waiting. You know I'm not the most patient of men."

Abel the Bard

Benjen Stark's appearance was unexpected, but in hindsight, he should have seen the First Ranger coming. Thankfully, they had never met in person, so he could not recognise his face. Still, Lord Stark could remember his face from all those years ago, but Mance had decided to risk it anyway. Not that he was unprepared, he let his beard grow out for this. As one of the knights demanded, he continued playing the lute, and his gaze moved towards the high seat.

The guards near the walls were carefully keeping an eye on him, and that would make him wary if the other bards were not under the same scrutiny.

The King was nothing like the peerless warrior described in the tales but just a fat man with a penchant for drinking. Even now, his face had grown red from too much wine as he was groping a maid in full view for all to see.

No, Robert Baratheon was not a threat. The only weapon he would lift was his wine cup.

The more worrying prospect, however, was the wolves. Lord Stark had grown gruffer and more dangerous after nearly ten years and was currently discreetly sneaking glances at the Queen's golden children with curiosity. Winterfell had always been a formidable fortress, but the last time he had not

paid much attention to it or its lord. Now though, Mance scarcely saw little, but it spoke loudly. Even if he had his whole army throw themselves at the walls of this keep, they would fail to take it.

Now it was teeming endlessly with wary guards, and he was barely allowed entry, even with his singing skills. It was very hard to sneak even a dagger and a short sword; even now, those lay in his room at the tavern. Abel was very glad to have left them behind, the inspection to enter the inner yard was ever stricter, and not even daggers were allowed unless you were highborn.

The biggest problem was that all the Stark children had gotten themselves a direwolf if half the rumours were true, including Wolf Lord himself. A fucking direwolf that could tear a limb off a man with nary an effort, and they were raising them as dogs!

Mance would eat his lute if they were not all wargs. Anyone else would have been long attacked, pups or not. The Old Gods had blessed House Stark greatly in the new generation, despite their loss.

The Night's Watch barely had a thousand men, but if Mance wanted his people to cross the Wall, he'd have to deal with the North, which meant dealing with House Stark. The King beyond the Wall wanted to think he could best the wolves on the field, but experience taught him otherwise. The summer was long, and according to the teachings of old maester Aemon, the North could mobilise forty thousand swords, and Eddard Stark's tactical acumen was a legend even fifteen years ago. He looked at Robb Stark, and there was that half-giant muscled man clad in steel near him. The two daughters were under watch by at least a dozen burly guardsmen, and the youngest boy was no less defended either.

Attempting to kidnap any of them was futile, especially with their direwolf pups. Even if Abel somehow succeeded, he would not manage to travel five miles without getting found. Mance Rayder shook his head and continued playing '*A dornishman's Wife'* for the Southron knights as they began to sing along. His biggest hope was for the fat stag king to pull the Lord of Winterfell to the South. A green boy would be far easier to deal with than someone like Eddard Stark.

Eddard Stark

Robert had become a pale shadow of himself; gone was the mighty warrior with a warhammer, and the fat and perfumed king had taken his place. And sure enough, both the betrothal and the Handship were offered, although he did not expect the hand of the Princess to be offered to Robb. Eddard had observed Cersei's children closely but could find little fault with them. Joffrey was not the most pleasant of boys, but few were at three and ten, and he had seen worse before. Myrcella was a beauty to behold with her long golden curls and emerald eyes, and while serious and proud, there was none of the ire and disdain her mother poorly tried to conceal. Not that it helped that Robert had a serving wench in his lap…

The feast had finally ended as the hour of the bat had approached. Now he was gathered together with Howland and Benjen in his solar. Three loyal men were guarding the stairs to this floor, and none would hear what they were to speak now.

His brother placed down his nephew's letter, and a forlorn sigh tore from his mouth as his brow was scrunched up in thought.

"So Jon's Lya's boy?" Benjen whispered as he shook his head. "Madness, all of it!"

"I wish it were so, but…" Ned shook his head. "As you read just now, we have greater problems we cannot ignore. You're the First Ranger. Do you think there's any truth to his warnings of the Others?"

His brother stood there deep in thought for a few moments before grimacing.

"I'm afraid it's quite possible. We lose far more men on ranging lately, and entire wildling villages are gone without a single soul remaining," Benjen slowly explained. "First, we thought it was Mance Rayder gathering them all before a desperate push through the Wall, but even he cannot muster all of them, and many of those hamlets are abandoned with food, clothing, and arms all left behind. The wildlings are afraid, and the few we've caught recently speak of the 'Cold Shadows'. We thought them growing mad from the cold and hunger, but…."

"I feared this was the case," the Lord of Winterfell sighed. "The deserter that we caught spoke a similar tale, you see. He was so mad with fear it made him flee all the way here to Winterfell, and his only request was to burn his body."

"Damn it all! The Night's Watch is not ready to face the Others!" His brother tiredly ran a hand through his dark hair. "Seven hells, we are not ready to deal with a King Beyond the Wall either. Scarcely a thousand men between three castles, and half of them builders and stewards, not too skilled with a blade or a bow."

"You'll have the North behind you," Ned squeezed Benjen's shoulder. "The Night's Watch won't stand alone. And if Jon's word is to be trusted, he knows how to deal with the Others. I've already sent for the clans and the Skagosi to start mining and fashioning obsidian into daggers, speartips and arrowheads."

"Aye, that's true, but you cannot call the northern banners to simply wait forever at the Wall," the First Ranger countered. "The wildlings can be broken in a decisive fight or two. But the Others? For all we know, any fighting against them might stretch for years. The Gift lays fallow. We can barely feed our own, let alone tens of thousands more throats for long."

"We need to strengthen the Night's Watch. But the question is how?" Eddard muttered to himself. "The South is never going to believe any of this, and we have no proof but some words. And words are wind."

He did not mention how Robert seemed to care little for the Watch. In fact, his old friend seemed to care little for anything not related to wenching, feasting, and drinking. The crown had brought the once mighty stag to ruin and decadence.

"Lord Commander Mormont has been struggling to do so for years, but all of his pleas for assistance to the Wall would have met deaf ears if not for the North," Bejen sighed. "As for proof, I will try to convince the Old Bear to try and procure some, but I give no promises. For no word to reach the Watch directly, all our rangers who met the Walkers were either slain or fled."

“You’ll arm yourself with obsidian-tipped weapons before you return to Castle Black,” Ned said with a tone that brooked no disagreements, and his brother nodded.

“It’s better than just words, but I doubt proof would be easily believed, even if you manage to procure a wight,” the Crannoglord cautioned. “The Others are far from the only ones capable of sorcery to raise the dead as their thralls.”

“Then what can we do?”

“There’s not much the North can do on its own that it has not done already,” Howland supplied as he thoughtfully scratched his chin. “But… there is a way, but you will mislike it.”

The Lord of Greywater Watch spoke with such a foreboding tone that it sent cold shivers down Ned’s spine.

“Tell me.”

“You can accept Princess Myrcella as a bride for Robb and demand the lands of the New Gift be returned to the North as a dowry with a reduced tax for five years. The king will not hesitate to grant it. You can use the coin to directly support the Watch. The Umbers would regain their lost lands, and so would the clansmen, and you would still have enough left to appoint two or three more middling lords to rebuild old holdfasts and repopulate the first line after the Wall.”

“You are right, I mislike the idea greatly,” Ned sighed heavily. He had dreamed of resettling the Gift before, but not like this. Abusing his position and haggling like a common merchant with the crown?

Benjen also did not look very eager about it.

Although the golden-haired maiden would make a fine wife for Robb, especially if Howland was right, and she was Robert’s daughter.

“Then you’ll mislike what I will say even more,” Howland continued. “While the Lord of Winterfell can reach only the North, the Hand can reach Seven Kingdoms.”

“I’m ill fit to rule as Hand, and it’s too dangerous,” Ned shook his head in denial.

"It's not an honour so easily declined," the Lord of Greywater Watch sighed. "The king came all the way here with pomp and pageantry, and you cannot let him return emptyhanded. And I don't mean to stay in the South for years. Go there, and do everything in your power to bolster the Night's Watch from the office of Hand. No need for proof they might or might not believe. Sending more men, more supplies would be easily within your grasp! Robert has always been a proud man, even more so with a crown atop his head. Sooner or later, you'll disagree on something, and you can resign and return North. By then, the Watch would be manyfold what it was before!"

“You want me to accept the Handship only to shirk away my duty later, Howland?!”

“The King is the Lord Protector of the Realm first, and that duty falls on the Hand second, Ned and that does not mean you would not do the rest of your duties and help Robert at the same time,” the crannogman shrugged. “If you have any better ideas, I’m all ears.”

After finishing another round of lovemaking, Ned left the bed without bothering to put on his clothes, made way for the windows, pulled the tapestries away, and opened them, enjoying the cool night air entering the chambers. His wife’s quarters were the warmest in the whole keep, and he oft felt them too suffocating for his taste.

He was intent on declining Robert on both of his offers, but damn Howland, he was speaking too much sense. And the worst was, they had no better ideas.

His desire to avoid the Southern mess was already futile. Vows and alliances he would never break bound him stronger than steel. Tully, Arryn, Stark, the bonds were already vowed and written in blood, and if he agreed, so would be Baratheon. At that moment, Ned felt like he was tangled in a web of his own making.

“Did Robert tell you how your foster father passed?” Cat’s soft voice echoed from the bed. “Or about my sister and her son?”

"I didn't ask," Ned admitted. Jon Arryn was far from his mind these days; he had greater troubles. His stay at the Eyrie seemed like an eternity ago. While he loved the Lord of the Vale, old men died all the time, and they did before they reached seventy, let alone eighty, like his foster father. He worried even less for Lysa and Robert Arryn, both of which outlived House Stark and Tully after ignoring their bonds by blood.

“Then what troubles you so?” Catelyn’s soft voice echoed from the bed, and he turned to face his wife.

Ah, how he wanted to tell her everything, but now was not the time or the place.

“I want to refuse him.”

"You cannot. You must not," she stood up. "The king travelled all this way to give you great honours other highlords can only dream of. The last time a princess married outside the Royal Family was over eighty years ago!"

“I know,” he agreed softly. “But I am sorely needed here.”

“The North is peaceful; there has not been a battle fought here in more than fifty years,” Catelyn said. “Isn’t Robb already aiding you in your duties? And all that additional tutoring you give him! He might be young, but our son is a man now and can handle any trouble that comes his way. Princess Myrcella is a demure yet smart girl, she would make a great wife for him and a worthy Lady of Winterfell.”

“I have no real reason to decline that marriage. He wanted to wed Arya and Joffrey first…” his wife made a choking sound and gaped like a fish. “Aye, I managed to dissuade him from that particular notion. But new, far direr tidings came from Beyond the Wall.”

She paled. “Did you not say Mance Rayder is nothing for us to fear?”

“I do not fear a bold deserter of the Night’s Watch,” he shook his head. “You turned out to be right. Far darker things stir in the Lands of Always Winter than desperate savages.”

“Ned?”

“The Others have begun to move again.”

“How can you know?” Cat shuddered and pulled her covers closer.

“It’s not a single thing,” he waved it away. “More missing rangers than ever, more deserters, the last one I executed was broken by fear, but not a fear of men. And a warning, a warning I could not ignore.”

“A warning?”

“A greenseer,” he lied and swallowed heavily as he felt a knot twist in his stomach. “He left me no room for doubt.”

Ned hated lying, but he did not feel it was the right moment to tell his wife *everything.* But it was not yet the time. Doubt was etched on her face, but it was replaced with thoughtfulness.

"And hearsay would easily be dismissed from the King and the rest of the Realm," Cat slowly muttered. She believed him; at that moment, he couldn't have loved her more. "Without proof, people would say the cold addles your wits, and you're seeing grumpkins and snarks where there are none."

“Aye, and I have no real proof to offer,” Ned agreed.

“You must still go South,” she said after a short moment of thought. “The North is already aiding the Watch as much as it can. In the court, you can forge more alliances for House Stark. And as Hand, you can force the rest of the kingdoms to provide men and supplies to the Wall. The North needs not be the only one to aid the Watch.”

A knock came at the door, loud and unexpected, making Ned turn with a frown.

“What is it?”

“My lord, Ser Rodrik caught a man trying to sneak into the Maester’s Turrent and sent a guard to report to you,” Desmond’s voice came through the door.

“I’ll be there in a few,” Ned said after exchanging a worried look with Cat before crossing to the wardrobe and grabbing his doublet and breeches.

A man sneaking like a catspaw during the night after the King's party arrived? It did not bode well at all.

Author's Endnote:

There's so much to unpack here as well. Ned has too much on his mind to ask about an old man dying, which is not particularly suspicious, so Jon Arryn is left mostly unmentioned. He also holds some subconscious bias against Lysa for not honouring her alliances with House Stark and Tully in the future.

Arya is preferred to Sansa because she's far closer age to Lyanna this time in looks and reminds Robert of his old flame. Myrcella's age gets her near the top of the list of marriageable royal children.

The die is cast, and Ned is faced with a choice he doesn't like. Damned if he does, damned if he doesn't.

Catelyn's reasoning is similar to the original so far, and Howland proves to be quite cunning in a practical sense. As for why she's so quick to believe? She was the one originally superstitious about things North of the Wall, and Ned was the one to dismiss them.

As we already established, Howland already believes that Cersei's children are Robert's and simply inherited their mother's colouring.

I want to remind you that Jon had no way of objectively knowing the truth, and neither did Howland or Ned at this point. The notion of the queen cuckolding the king with her own brother and nobody would find out is so absurd that it is barely believable, especially from the mouth of the one that benefits the most (Stannis, who was the closet source of information Jon had on the topic).

Oh, and the increased security in Winterfell begins to bear its first fruits.