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.

Davos Seaworth

Dragonstone

Despite Maester Cressen's fears, Stannis had finally awoken three days ago. They still had no idea what had started the fire; the claw knight had grown highly paranoid, and the fortress's defences had been tightened to the extreme. Not even a rat could enter without the knowledge of the master-at-arms. Worse, the Lord of Dragonstone was in great pain, and his throat couldn't produce anything beyond raspy coughs or pained wheezes.

And thus, he was still stuck here, unable to leave for nearly a moon now. There was little to do in the fortress; the Onion Knight was never one for training at arms, especially in his old age and with his missing fingers. So, most of his time was spent walking around idly, and he visited the local sept for the first time in years. Davos was not a particularly godly man, but a prayer or two were not remiss at times like these. Yet he could spend only so much time in the sept before growing tired of it. Even then, the aimless waiting would have been nigh unbearable if not for little Lady Shireen's insistence that he learn how to read.

Stannis' daughter was still the sweet and gentle little girl he remembered, but she had grown even sadder. Her eyes almost always rimmed with red, and he knew she probably cried herself to sleep every night. Still, she showed steely resilience, and once Shireen had something on her mind, nothing could stop her. Thus, when she decided the old smuggler needed to learn to read, he couldn't help but buckle to her persistence.

Davos’s mind idly wandered towards his sons; the seven had deigned to bless him with seven healthy sons, and he couldn’t help but wonder if the gods had given him a sign. But alas, he was not a septon and could not even begin to understand the gods’ will. Dale was grown enough to handle things on his own, but his other boys were young and impatient enough to do something foolish without his supervision after so long. Especially Allard, who was rash and had a penchant for finding trouble when there was none. Hopefully, his eldest would keep them in line.

Just as he watched the dreary sunset while enjoying the breeze and the smell of salt, sulfur, and brimstone from the western wall, a fat guardsman rushed over.

Davos recognised him as Dain, the local butcher's son who had a notorious fondness for salted pork and freshly baked sweetbread with the body to show for it too.

“Lord Baratheon has summoned ye,” the man wheezed as he tried to catch his breath.

Thank the Seven, it seemed that Stannis had recovered!

“I shall go at once,” the former smuggler reassured with a curt nod and headed to the Stone Drum tower.

Hopefully, with his liege lord back on his feet, Davos could leave to box Allard’s ears in again, return to his beautiful Marya, and see his two youngest.

By the time he climbed the overly long flight of stairs and reached the Lord’s quarters, the Onion Knight was out of breath. Father above, he was made for the sea, not climbing like a squirrel! At least his holdfast was nothing more than a small tower with four floors and a thirteen-foot-tall curtain wall, but good enough to keep brigands and pirates out.

The imposing pair of guardsmen guarding Stannis' quarters nodded at him and opened the door.

The chamber smelled heavily of herbs and poultices. It was a nearly empty room with no ornaments and luxuries beyond the barest necessities. The Lord of Dragonstone lay still on the bed, most of his body aside from the face covered entirely by green-tinted soaked bandages.

Davos quickly came over to the bed and sat on the nearby chair.

Stannis shuffled uneasily and twisted his head to look at him with his dark blue eyes.

“Ser Davos, I am in need of advice,” the Baratheon wheezed out painfully before starting to cough wetly.

"I would be glad to give you my advice, m'lord," he bowed his head lightly, "yet I'm but a former smuggler and know little of the lordly games and woes. Ser Hardy or Maester Cressen could provide far better counsel than me."

“I have heard their counsel, and now I shall hear yours!” Another bout of wet, sickly coughing ensued. It took a few painful moments before he calmed down. “Cressen says my lungs are damaged beyond repair.”

The former smuggler recoiled at the news. Stannis had always been a man of iron will and conviction, undaunted even after starving for nearly a year in Storm’s End. He remembered the young, painfully thin Lord back then, whose eyes were like two darkened and raw chips of sapphire, unbroken despite the odds.

“How long…?”

“The Maester says little more than half a year if I stay here,” another sickly wheeze that made Davos wince inwardly. “The sulfur and brimstone of the Dragonmont are bad for my damaged lungs, he says. As if I have not been here for sixteen years! I am to spend the rest of my days confined to my bed, dying slowly and painfully! My legs are so badly burned that the barest of movements alone is as agonising as threading barefoot upon jagged steel, let alone walking. Cressen was surprised I even managed to survive, as the odds were in favour of the Stranger.”

“Can’t nothing be done?” Davos hopefully inquired.

“Can’t anything be done,” the Lord repeated, wheezing painfully.

“What?”

"Can't have a double negative," Stannis explained hoarsely, much to the smuggler's incomprehension. A scowl settled on his face, and a pained sigh tore from his parched lips. "Forget it. Suppose I move away, I can extend that half a year, but for how long, Cressen does not tell," another painful but thankfully short bout of coughing. "Yet who can I trust when the Lannisters are trying to get rid of me? My master-at-arms and maester claim that the fire was but an accident, that no outsiders entered the fortress that day, but I know better. Jon Arryn, the second most guarded man in the Seven Kingdoms, thought himself safe, yet they murdered him with ease. My wife has perished, and my daughter was almost killed in my keep!"

“You think Lord Tywin Lannister is behind the fire and the Hand’s death?”

“Nay, not him, but his children. The old lion is content to sit in his gilded rock and rule his hills, but the Imp, the Kingslayer, and the Harlot are -”

Another round of wet coughing interrupted Stannis’ words, and his face twisted in pain. A few painful heartbeats later, the bedridden Lord finally calmed down.

“Why not go to His Grace with this?”

“I have no proof,” Stannis bitterly croaked out. “Even if I did, it would be dismissed, and I would be slighted once more if I even managed to leave King’s Landing alive. No matter what I do, it is not enough for him! The only family my kingly brother cares about is Eddard Stark; somehow, the Lord of Winterfell is more of a brother to Robert than I ever was! Even now, he’s going all the way North to make him his Hand instead of asking me. No, Robert and his northern brother can deal with the Lannisters on their own.”

Davos had never seen his liege’s mask of iron composure crack like this. Stannis’ face had reddened, and he was heaving and wheezing heavily. The onion knight finally realised that the disgruntled Lord of Dragonstone is only human and could be pushed beyond his limit too.

“What shall you do then, m’lord?”

“I must prepare my daughter for when I pass on, lest the snakes and lions tear her apart,” he coughed out. “She shall be the Lady of Dragonstone after me, but half a year is not enough. I… know I am not loved amongst the Lords. Which of my vassals do you think could be trusted enough with my daughter and me against the Lannister gold?”

Davos rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Lord Monford Valeryon, m’lord,” he stated with confidence.

“Why?”

“He’s a proud man from an old House, and Castle Driftmark is well-defensible. The Lannisters killed Lord Monford’s aunt in the sack, and he’ll never forget that. His Grace has strongly suppressed all the former dragon loyalists, and last but not least, you saved his baseborn son’s life during the Greyjoy Rebellion.”

Robb Stark

Sparring simply helped him get his mind off all the woes and the… wrongness. One day, he was two siblings short, and while his mother might have somewhat reduced her visits to the sept, only to turn her attention to Rickon, who was quickly beginning to chafe under all that coddling. Alas, she stubbornly refused to listen to anyone and was glued to his younger brother at all times. At the start, Rickon loved it, but he quickly tired of it and grew rebellious and oft attempted to run away, much to his mother’s chagrin.

Rodrik had taught him how to use a greatsword long ago, but he had preferred a longsword, so he was out of practice. After nearly a fortnight of heavy training, his body had remembered the previous drilling, and his movements were no longer choppy or awkward. But the blunted greatsword was far heavier than what Robb was used to, and he grew tired faster than before. His lungs were on fire and screamed for more air as he was forcing his weary body to keep exchanging blows with the energetic Jory Cassel. While Robb had fought five guardsmen one after another already, the captain of the guards was rested, as he had sparred only with a single man so far.

Even with his last moon heavily focused in the yard, the heir of Winterfell could scarcely beat Jory one out of five bouts, and that was if he was lucky. The captain was taller, stronger, and more experienced and skilled than Robb.

He felt his movements slowly grow sluggish, and a few moments later, his greatsword was knocked aside, and the blunted tip of Jory’s blade was at his gorget.

“I yield,” Robb tiredly grunted out with a grimace.

“You lasted longer than last time,” the captain said as his eyes lit up, and he placed his sword away.

“Still getting my arse handed to me, though.”

“Any improvement matters,” Jory pointed out. “If you keep this up, soon, very few will be your match in Winterfell.”

Robb couldn’t help but grin; at the start, spending almost all of his time in the yard was just to let the anger out. The rage was quickly smacked out of him, as a furious swordsman was easier to defeat. Instead, he had channelled all of his fervour into unyielding persistence, and now, even with a greatsword, he could best some of the guardsmen that defeated him before. Alas, Jon was gone, disappeared gods know here, and he had nobody his age worthy to test his skill against. Theon was three years his elder, yet Robb defeated him even before, let alone now. Not that the heir to the Iron Isles trained too hard. Even now, he was in Wintertown, visiting Ros.

“Maybe with a longsword, I’d stand a better chance,” Robb couldn’t help but grumble, looking at Jory‘s smug face.

“In a few years,” the captain chuckled goodnaturedly. “You’ve not seen blood in battle yet, Lord Robb. There’s a difference between a man who has fought and killed for his life and one who has not.”

He nodded absentmindedly, returned his blunted greatsword to the weapons rack, and turned to watch his father spar with Rodrik as he began rubbing his sore body. Instead of a greatsword, his father favoured sword and a dagger and was slowly but surely whittling away the knight's defences. Eventually, Rodrik overextended, and his father managed to pin his opponent's sword to the side with his dagger and slammed his shoulder, knocking the older knight to the ground. Eddard Stark helped his grumbling master-at-arms up, gave his shoulder a squeeze, and turned towards the most veteran of the guardsmen.

The next opponent turned out to be Hallis Mollen, and Robb trudged towards the Guest House after ordering one of the servants to bring him a set of clean clothes to change into. It was time to get a few precious moments of rest for his sore body in the hot springs before his father finished his own sparring and needled him for more lordly lessons.

Robb entered the Godswood from the small wooden gate next to the Guest House and was greeted by the pleasant scent of pine and oak. The canopy above blocked the sun, and, on the ground, the gnarly roots and stones were covered by moss, surrounding the packed earth. There was also a faint mist coming from the direction of the hot springs. The heir of Winterfell took a few moments to admire the serene view and trudged towards the softly churning waters just below the moss-covered wall. Small streams flowed out of the three hot springs and merged together before crossing the Godswood and flowing into the castle’s moat.

With a groan, he quickly discarded his clothes on a large stone nearby and entered the steaming pool on the left.

The bubbling water reached just below his ribs, and Robb took a few moments to find a shallower side to sit down so only his head stayed above. The soreness in his muscles was replaced by the pleasant,

encompassing warmth, and he let out a sigh of contentment and closed his eyes as a robin chirped from a nearby elm.

His mind slowly drifted over the last half a moon; Eddard Stark rarely visited the yard to train, as he was usually busy with his Lordly duties and was either spending his time in the solar or riding off to settle disputes. But this changed a fortnight ago, shortly after Jon disappeared. His father also shelved some of his lesser duties and made ample time to give Robb personal tutoring every day instead of twice a sennight.

The melodic singing of the bird felt so calming…

"-Robb, Robb!"

A voice startled him awake, and he almost jumped out of the water.

Across the pool, thinly veiled by steam, his father was sitting, only head and shoulders above the water, hair glistening with moisture. Gods, he hadn't even heard anyone approach!

"Hello, father," Robb coughed out once he calmed down. The chirping bird was nowhere to be heard, and the only other sound was the soft bubbling of the hot water.

"Had a nice nap?" Eddard Stark asked with a knowing smile. Gone was the usually troubled demeanour that he carried around.

"Aye," he confirmed with a sigh. "Is it time for our lessons?"

"In a bit," his father hummed as he stretched his arms. He noticed a few old scars along his shoulder and forearms. "But if you're ready, we can mayhaps start here."

Robb barely managed to hold in his groan. He didn't mind doing his duty, be it training or learning. But there was scarcely any spare time anymore, and when he did manage to find an hour or two, he was too tired to do much. Alas, being the heir of House Stark was far from fun.

"In the Godswood?"

"Nobody said that lessons must be given in a dusty room," Eddard Stark chortled. "In fact, I find myself liking it here more."

"Fine, but I have a few queries first, Father," after receiving a nod, Robb slowly continued. "I didn't ask until now, but I feel that I need to know. Why make me train only with a greatsword? Why the more intense and detailed lessons?"

After half a minute of silence, the Lord of Winterfell sighed heavily, and his grey eyes looked weary. For a short moment, the unshakable pillar of a man was replaced with a tired and weary father, but a moment

later, his eyes hardened into two chips of stone. Robb couldn't help but notice that the greying beard made him look far older than his four and thirty years.

“You are of age now, Robb,” he began slowly. “When I was your age, I expected to become a master-at-arms somewhere and mayhaps fall in love and wed a beautiful highborn maid.”

“But you love mother!”

“Aye, I do love her now,” his father confirmed with a small chuckle. “How can I not love a woman who gave me five strong children? But this was not always the case. She was to be your uncle Brandon’s wife; alas, the Rebellion happened. I was not prepared to be the Lord of Winterfell, let alone a husband. I never spoke to your mother before we wed, and we entered the marriage bed as strangers. Lately, I feel that I have not prepared you enough for becoming the next Lord of Winterfell.”

“You’re hale and hearty father, I won’t become Lord until you probably see your grandchildren grow up!”

“That was my hope as well,” Eddard Stark hummed with a soft chuckle. “But fate oft makes fools of the best of us. If something happens to me, I’ll have you be prepared.”

Chills ran through Robb’s spine despite the hot water surrounding him.

“Is this about the King’s visit? Weren’t you friends?”

“A crown can change a man, but enough of this,” his father’s voice grew stern. “I’ll tell you more about the south when we’re done with the Northern Lords. But first, as for why I’m having you train with a greatsword. The reason is simple; for years and years, I learned how to fight with a longsword and dagger, and when the time came to wield Ice, it was too cumbersome for me. You might have noticed, but I only use our ancestral blade for ceremonial purposes and not as a weapon of war as it was intended.”

“Isn’t Ice just too big and heavy to be used in battle?”

“Valyrian steel is easily half the weight of normal metal, so while Ice is not light, it’s not unusable. Swords forged in the fires of the Freehold also have an unnaturally sharp edge that never dulls, so a skilled and strong swordsman can cut through normal men like a butcher through pigs. Your grandsire, Rickard Stark, was said to chop through steel, bone, and wood effortlessly with Ice in hand in the War of the Ninepenny Kings. He split one of the leaders of the Band of Nine in two with a single swing of his sword; shield, plate, and bone cleaved through cleanly. I might not be able to wield Ice in battle, but you will. Does that answer your questions?”

"Aye," Robb confirmed. The thought of using the ancestral blade of his House stirred something primal within him.

"I will also let you handle some of my Lordly duties with my supervision and guidance from now on," Eddard Stark thoughtfully added before splashing his face with a handful of hot water. "But that's for later. Now, let's begin with our lesson. Tell me how you would handle the Northern Lords during a war campaign, especially Lords Umber, Bolton, and Karstark."

The heir of Winterfell stirred from his resting place with interest. Lately, his lessons were quite different from the usual warfare, lordly duties and rights. They now focused on a detailed analysis of the Northern Lords, their keeps, their Houses, and their current relationship with the Starks in the last twenty years. But this was the first time his father asked him how he would deal with specific Northern bannermen in war.

“Karstark is stern but leal,” he carefully began as he tried to glean anything from his father’s now impassive face. Alas, it was in vain. Robb felt envious of Eddard Stark’s stony expression that gave nothing away. “He’ll do whatever task I assign him easily enough. The GreatJon is proud and fierce, though he will be difficult to deal with unless I earn his respect. But how would I do that?”

“You tell me,” the Lord of Winterfell returned evenly, and his gaze turned piercing, making Robb feel even more naked than he already was.

“I should present a firm and unyielding front,” Robb finally spoke after a minute of thoughtful silence. “Or impress him with my martial prowess. But I doubt I can do anything noteworthy against the Giant of Last Hearth.”

"Indeed," his father acquiesced. "You cannot show weakness if you wish to lead the North. But once you earn Lord Umber's respect, he’ll be your lealest bannerman. What you said about Karstark is true, but Rickard is also a very vengeful man. He lost a brother in the Stoney Sept to a member of house Cressey, and later in the Trident, he dedicated all of his efforts to hunting down anyone with the Cressey sigil. They still haven’t recovered from that butchery, if I recall correctly. You can assign whatever positions you want to him, but should one of his kin die, he will try to get vengeance no matter what. What about Roose Bolton and the rest of the Lords?”

Robb gulped as he processed this.

“The others aren’t particularly troublesome to lead. But I’m not sure how to handle Roose Bolton,” he finally admitted.

“The Lord of the Dreadfort is easy enough to handle from a position of strength, but a Bolton is never to be trusted,” his father slowly explained. “Roose, in particular, is remorseless and cunning and wouldn’t hesitate to stab you in the back should it prove beneficial to him and his House. With that in mind, how would you handle him during a war?”

Robb paused for another heartbeat, remembering the bad history between the Kings of Winter and the Red Kings.

“If the Boltons are such a thorn in our side, why didn’t House Stark vanquish them when they rebelled twice?”

"It's not something written in the history books, or Luwin would know," Eddard Stark acknowledged with a sigh. "I had a similar question to my father when I was just a boy before going to foster to the Eyrie. The first time, the Boltons managed to lay the blame at the feet of the unruly Greystarks and had a legitimate excuse to revolt. A Bolton son was slain on Stark lands, and the Kings of Winter refused to give any explanation or recompense, or so the story goes. They somehow managed to goad the Greystarks into starting a rebellion. Remember, my son, the Flayed Man is always cunning. The second time they rebelled was when the North was attacked by the Ironborn and an alliance of Andal Warlords at the same time. King Harlon Stark defeated his foes, only to return home and find it burned by Lord Royce Bolton. The Dreadfort was too hard to take, and winter would soon be upon them."

His father took a deep breath and continued.

“If House Stark had stormed the hardy and well-manned fortress, the losses would have been big enough to greatly weaken their position as kings. The cunning Flayed Lord thought that the snow would melt away Harlon’s army and resolve, but he was wrong. After two years, when their larders began to run low, the Boltons finally felt fear and bent their knee on the condition that their youngest, the three-year-old grandson of the Flayed Lord, was spared from the Black or the block. The Northern King reluctantly accepted because the winter was too harsh, and his army was soon on its last leg. Now, let’s get back to the question at hand.”

At that moment, Robb finally felt uncomfortable after standing in the hot water for so long. Gods, his skin had gone all pruney. He carefully left the pool and grabbed a grey towel to dry himself, and quickly began putting on the clean clothes the servants had placed nearby.

"I would avoid giving Bolton any important command of any of the troops," Robb hesitantly provided as he clasped his leather belt. "A position of honour, not too important and one he cannot refuse, would be perfect. Particularly, one with plenty of danger and little glory, to whittle down the Bolton forces and, if I'm lucky, he'll die from the enemy in the process or be captured."

His father nodded with approval and rose from the bubbling waters, revealing a lean yet powerful scarred body, reminding Robb that his father had seen plenty of fighting. There was a wide sword scar on the side and a few smaller ones on his back and above his navel. Eddard Stark had never been fat, but the hint of plumpness that had begun to appear in the last few years was nowhere to be seen now.

“That is a good plan,” Eddard Stark acknowledged, but his face grew deathly serious, and his voice became heavy. “But you must remember, Winterfell is the most important thing for House Stark. As long as it stands, House Stark will stand strong. With five hundred men, you can repel ten thousand; with two thousand, you can stop half a hundred thousand. If you have to go South to fight a war, make sure to leave an ample garrison and a trusted person in charge. Throw the forces of more unruly lords in the most dangerous parts of the fighting, but do not compromise your battles by giving the important

positions to those unfit to stand in them. It will keep them honoured and weakened while preserving most of your own forces while also giving them a taste of battle.”

Robb couldn’t help but feel stumped at his father’s words. That was quite… cunning and unlike anything he was taught before.

“But wouldn’t it be dishonouring yourself with actions like this?”

“Nay, there is nothing dishonourable about giving your bannermen a chance to win some spoils and glory,” was the impassive reply. “It seems that I have taught you wrong. Robb, what is honour?”

The heir of Winterfell was stumped for a short moment, and Eddard Stark finally finished clothing himself and sat on a clean stone nearby.

“Doing the right thing?”

"Right according to whom?" His father countered, and after half a minute of uneasy silence, he continued. "There are many types of honour, but the most important is to honour one's vows. A Lord's word is as weighty as a mountain and should not be given lightly. It is why we upheld our agreement with the Boltons in their second and last rebellion, despite the temptation of destroying them root and stem as we had done to many other nameless Houses before them. If you shirk it, your word will always mean less for it, and people will begin doubting your ability to rule your vassals. People would say House Stark was nothing more than a clan of traitors for rebelling against the dragons, but they forget that fealty is a vow that goes both ways. Obeisance is given only in return for mercy, justice, and protection, and House Stark received neither. And when I called the banners in rebellion, all my bannermen answered me dutifully, despite being a boy raised in the Vale that few had seen and even fewer had remembered. Did you know that I was in love with another woman before I married your mother?"

The heir of Winterfell sat there stunned, unsure if he had heard correctly. Then, something clicked.

“Was it Jon’s mother?”

"Nay," was the forlorn denial. "There's another story there, one that you will hear soon if your studies progress well enough. I had resolved myself to not speak of this, but mayhaps you need to hear it. It was Ashara Dayne, and we had agreed to wed each other."

“But-” Robb’s words failed him at that moment. This was the first time he had heard about any of this, and he felt so confused. If the woman in question was not Jon’s mother, was his father having an intended and a paramour on the side?

"Aye, we were young, and I was just a second son with no land to inherit. Despite being Dornish, the Daynes are a respected House with a strong Fist Man ancestry and tradition, said to originate all the way in the Dawn Age. Alas, the gods laugh at the plans of men, and your grandfather and uncle perished in the hands of the Mad King in a foul mockery of a trial. During the Rebellion, our forces were severely

lacking in numbers, and we could not afford Hoster Tully to join the royalist cause or even to stay neutral, which would leave our western flank and supply lines completely open. So, despite my promises of marriage to Ashara Dayne, when the Lord of Riverrun demanded to renew the marriage arrangement to our Houses, I agreed. And I do not regret it. I scarcely even remember how the dornish beauty even looked anymore. Nothing good awaited House Stark if we had lost, and both of us wouldn't even be here to have this conversation. House Stark is not just our family, but every single soul under us that we have sworn to protect." His father's speech fell into a pregnant pause for a moment. "So… what is honour?"

A heavy silence followed up as Robb was pondering on his answer. A few minutes later, a set of hurried footsteps heralded the arrival of one of the guardsmen, Wayn.

“M’lord, Howland Reed is at the gates, claiming he’s here to see you.”

"Let him in. I'll meet him in the yard in a few minutes," Eddard Stark ordered the guardsman, who quickly ran off, knowing he was not supposed to be in the Godswood for longer than necessary. His father turned to look towards Robb again. "Well, my son, think on it carefully. There is no need to give me a hasty answer. I suppose our further lessons shall wait for tomorrow. Go to Luwin and brush up on your recent history of the Great Houses of the South and their current members."

The Lord of Winterfell headed towards the yard, leaving Robb Stark alone in the godswood, deep in thought.

Author's Endnote:

Stannis is not well and is getting paranoid. I mean, who wouldn’t?

It seems that Ned doesn’t want to sit back and wait for stuff to happen to him and starts making some preparations.